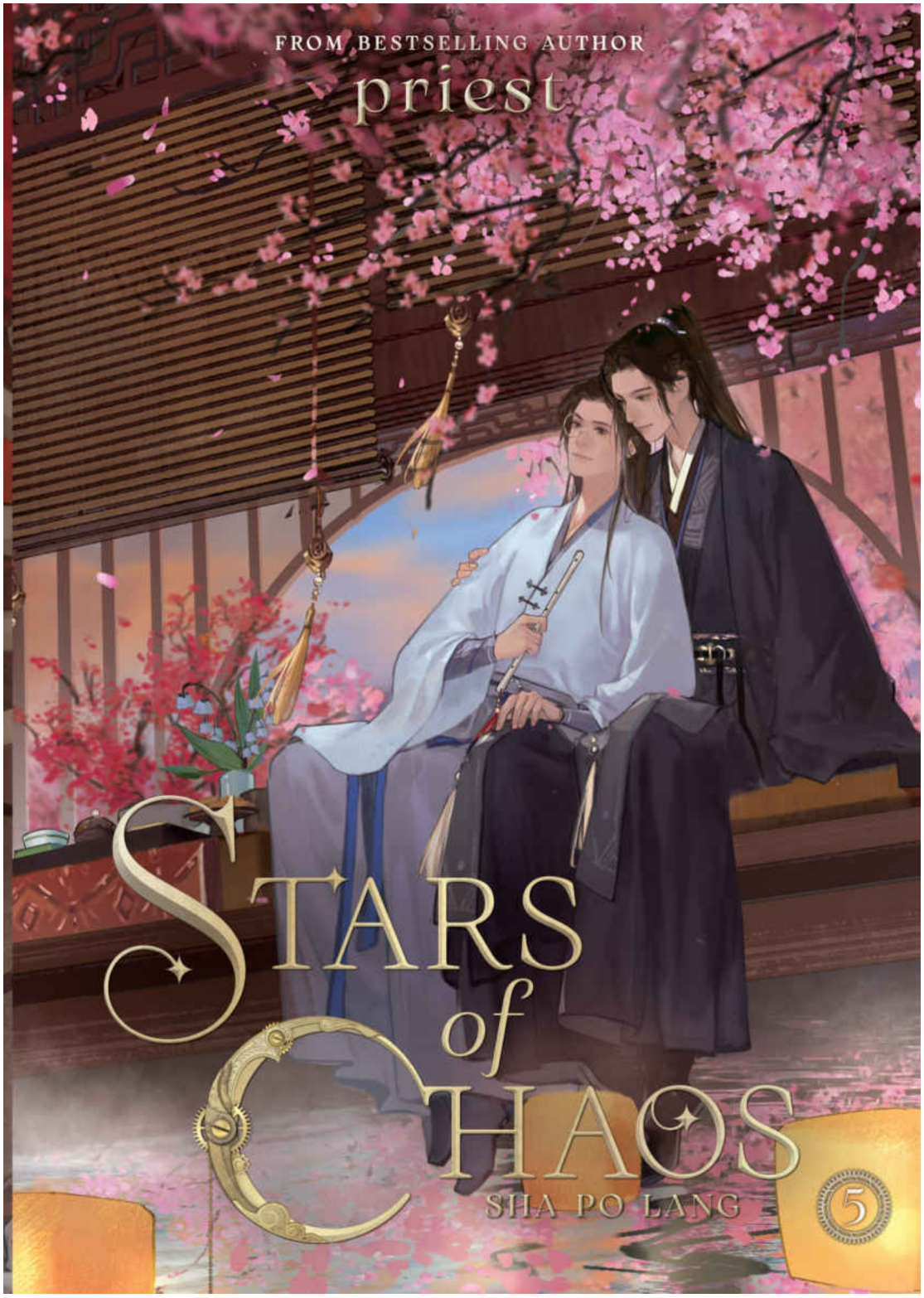
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priest
STARS of CHAOS
SHA PO LANG
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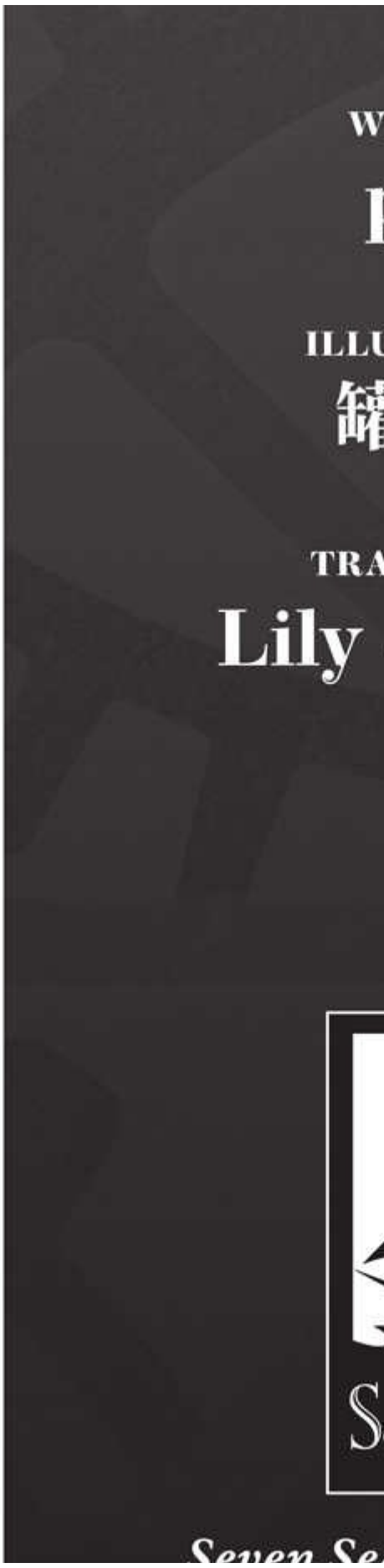
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STARS OF CHAOS:
SHA PO LANG VOL. 5

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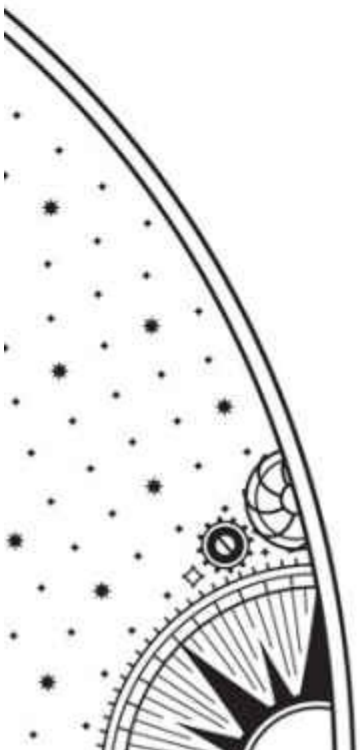

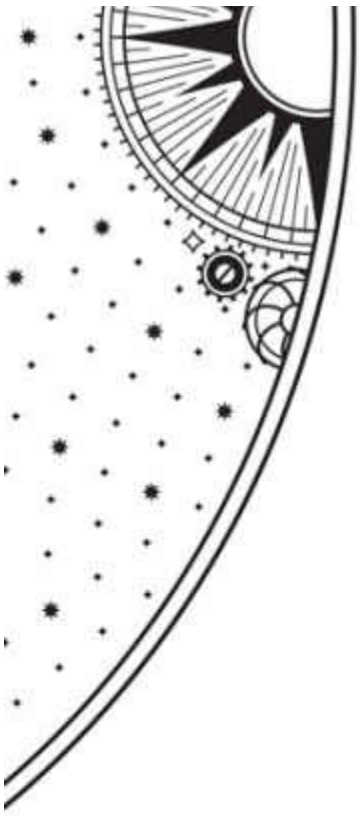

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ENI

Chapter 115:
Turning the Tables

"THE FACE LOOKS FAMILIAR."

This was the conclusion Gu Yun offered after spending long minutes examining the woman-shaped object lying on the ground.

The Black Iron Battalion had scoured every centimeter of the Wolf King's yurt. They found no rare beads, nor pearls, nor coral curling with metal filigree. The magnificent shell of his residence hid an impoverished interior. Jialai Yinghuo apparently hadn't spared himself before beginning to squeeze the nobility dry—

a selfless and impartial lunatic.

To Gu Yun's immense disappointment, they found no hint of the goddess's fabled secret shamanic techniques. This was not wholly unexpected. It was the people of Great Liang who loved to write everything down on paper and collect it in books. The eighteen tribes maintained many of their original traditions: most of what they needed to record was carved in stone, etched on tortoise shells or animal skins, or simply passed down by oral tradition. Perhaps the shamanic techniques they were so desperate to find were inscribed only within Jialai's memory, and had now gone up in smoke with the rest of him.

In the end, at Chen Qingxu's insistence, this peculiar statue was all they dragged back to the encampment on the northern border.

"What did Miss Chen say this thing was?" Gu Yun asked his personal guard. "A something idol?"

"A soul idol," the guard replied. Watching Gu Yun brazenly poke the thing with a wooden stick, he couldn't resist cutting in. "Sir, this statue looks rather sinister. Maybe it hosts some unclean spirit. Perhaps you should keep your distance?"

This soul idol was the size of an adult woman, but weighed only a dozen or so kilograms. When wiped clean, its face and skin were nigh indistinguishable from those of a living person, as if at any moment it might open its eyes and begin to speak. A closer examination revealed it wasn't covered in one complete human skin, but was a patchwork creation pieced together using the skin of numerous young men and women, which had been treated with some sort of shamanic technique to fuse the parts into a seamless whole. Wrapped smoothly around a wooden base carved into the shape of a person, this skin created a lifelike doll.

The eighteen tribes believed an idol like this could summon back the soul of a countryman who had died in foreign lands. The soul idol had been coated in a layer of grime earlier, but after a wash, it looked exactly like a real naked woman. Shen Yi found the sight of it incredibly improper, and sent someone to find a set of clothes for the thing to wear.

Gu Yun stared at the soul idol's closed eyes without speaking. He felt its face looked not unlike Chang Geng's when he was younger. Stroking his chin in thought, he carded through his memories. "Say, do you think this statue was meant to summon the late barbarian consort's soul?"

The personal guard was a superstitious man, afraid to even look at the thing. “Sir, I think we should get it out of here; all this talk of gods and ghosts is giving me the creeps…”

“It’s all right.” Gu Yun took another look at the soul idol’s face and remarked, “Actually, she’s quite good-looking.”

The guard thought Marshal Gu’s mind had finally cracked under the fatigue of manning both the northern and southern fronts. Before he could say any more, Chen Qingxu, who had gone to check on Shen Yi, rushed back inside. “I remember!”

“Hm?” Gu Yun gestured for her to continue.

Chen Qingxu pulled a knife from who knew where, dropped to one knee, and sliced open the soul idol’s chest before Gu Yun and his superstitious guard’s astonished eyes.

Gu Yun was speechless. His guard shuddered in fright and turned his face away, chanting, “Amitabha Buddha.” Gu Yun shot a glance at him, then back at Chen Qingxu cutting into the statue like a butcher carving up a cow, and passed his wooden stick to the trembling man. “Use this to ward off the evil spirits,” he said kindly.

Chen Qingxu shut out everything else as she channeled all her focus to the tip of her blade. The human skin was smooth and supple on the outside, the texture of well-tanned leather, and no flesh or blood lay beneath after it was cut open, splitting cleanly to both sides. Chen Qingxu maintained a precise pressure, just enough to slice through the skin without damaging the wood beneath.

Gu Yun watched idly at first. A moment later, he narrowed his eyes, then rolled up his sleeves and crouched down. Unhindered by any superstitious hesitation, he pulled aside the skin and ran careful fingers over the surface of the wood.

The guard’s face went green. Stumbling over an apology, he clutched his marshal’s spirit-warding stick and bolted outside to stand watch at the door.

Gu Yun felt around a moment. “There are characters carved into the wood.”

Chen Qingxu had cut the figure open from head to toe. Now she switched to a smaller knife and scraped the skin free in delicate strokes, like she was peeling the shell from a raw egg, until the entire human-shaped wooden armature was exposed. Her hands stilled and she finally responded. “There are, but they’re small and shallow. Only someone with an extraordinarily keen sense of touch could parse them. Most people would probably need some kind of tools to read them—Marshal, can you make anything of it?”

The Black Iron Battalion and the eighteen tribes had been foes for generations, and many of the higher-ups within the Black Iron Battalion could read common words and phrases in the barbarian language. Gu Yun felt around the statue’s neck, speaking only after a long pause. “They’re all rather obscure terms. Steam and boil…something… Don’t recognize that, the next one’s a number… Oh, this seems to be something about sunlight…” He looked up at Chen Qingxu, mystified. “Why does this soul idol have some kind of strange recipe carved on it? Uh… Miss Chen, are you quite all right?”

He had never before seen such intense emotion on Chen Qingxu's face. Tears threatened to fall from her icy eyes. She picked up the statue with reverent hands, as if she had never seen a piece of wood in her life, and wiped the dust away with a silk handkerchief like she held a priceless treasure.

"To summon a spirit home from foreign lands, a soul idol forms a bridge between life and death. The most common method involves placing the deceased's personal belongings in the core of the wooden figure. When the idol's creator uses this kind of ritual to pay respects to the spirit of the deceased, it is often because the true body is thousands of kilometers away, their gravesite perhaps impossible to find. It's not always feasible to acquire any of their personal effects. In such cases, the spell's caster will use the deceased's last words or some other mantra to represent them instead."

Chen Qingxu continued, "When the barbarian sisters fled the inner palace, the elder sister died far from home, and the younger sister found herself in the clutches of a bandit nest with her sister's child. But before the noble consort died, she left something very important to Huge'er, which ultimately fell into Wolf King Jialai's hands…"

Gu Yun's heart began to race.

"The goddess's secret techniques." Chen Qingxu spoke the very words that had risen into his mind. "I… I had considered this possibility, but for it to be true…"

The madwoman Huge'er dominated everyone's recollections of the barbarian sisters, leaving little room for the noble consort herself. She had died too early. Whether she had resented, hated, or accepted her fall from the lofty demigod of the grasslands to a cloistered existence behind the nine sealed gates of the imperial harem, there was no longer any way to know. As for her feelings about her own child, one could only guess.

She had probably hated him. Forget the woman herself—even Jialai had been spurred to murderous rage by the sight of Chang Geng's youthful visage which so resembled those of the goddess sisters. Yet the mysterious shamanic techniques of the eighteen tribes had left even the Chen family bewildered these many years. As the bearer of that inheritance, the noble consort could have easily snuffed the life of her unborn babe in the womb without anyone the wiser. Why had she chosen to keep the child?

Did she know her mad sister would twist her son into a wu'ergu?

There weren't many of her own generation left in the tribes. No one would ever know whether the barbarian goddess had kept the child out of a mother's love, or whether she had learned Huge'er was pregnant with her own babe and, motivated by hatred over the subjugation of her clan and people, plotted with her sister to create an unparalleled wicked god.

Whatever the case, via the twists and turns of fate, it was the goddess's own soul idol that presented Chang Geng with this final chance at survival. It was, in a way, a form of karmic retribution.

Chen Qingxu had no interest in the vagaries of karma or fate. All her attention was fixed on this piece of wood. As Gu Yun stood stunned, she clutched the wooden statue and swept off like the wind, not even stopping to pick up the handkerchief she'd used to wipe the armature. Gu Yun was belatedly kicked in the

chest by a hope he couldn't put to words. All the breath ran out of him.

When he stood again, his vision flashed dark. The dimness cleared, but his ears continued to ring. He rubbed at his chin, attempting to school his face into its customary stern lines, but even as his eyebrows drew together, he couldn't keep the corners of his mouth from sneaking up into a smile. The severity he tried to draw over himself and the joy he couldn't suppress wove together in a perfect example of what people meant when they said someone was torn between laughter and tears. Even Gu Yun felt he must have looked deranged.

General Shen's personal guard had approached from the neighboring tent. After peering around, he asked, "Has Miracle Doctor Chen gone?"

"She just left," Gu Yun heard his own guard reply. "Why? Do you need her?"

The young soldier who had been sent to inquire shook his head and jogged back to report. A moment later, Gu Yun heard a pained cry from within General Shen's tent, finally released after being stifled for who knew how long.

Shen Yi's back was a terrifying tapestry of wounds and burns. Still, he had valiantly resisted Miss Chen's visits and offers of treatment, leaving her standing outside the door multiple times in his determination to hide his sorry state. As a mark of his resolution, he had called on an army medic, one of those most adept at butchering pigs, to treat his wounds, then sent his men to secretly check four or five times until Chen Qingxu finally left and he could unlock his throat and wail.

Gu Yun cocked his head and listened. Even a woman giving birth might not scream with such agony. Breast filling with pity, he plucked up Miss Chen's discarded silk handkerchief from the ground and shook it clean of dust, then stepped outside and stuffed it into his guard's hands. "Bring this to General Shen—for the pain."

Regardless of how that handkerchief had been recently put to use, it was extraordinarily effective. Shen Yi's howls quieted as soon as it was delivered.

After playing this blackhearted prank on his dearest friend, Gu Yun stepped back inside the commander's tent, intending to reply to the pile of battlefield reports and letters from the local garrisons making a mound on his desk. But upon picking up his brush, he found himself struggling to clear his mind.

He recognized every character on the reports, but failed to string any of them into a coherent sentence. His mind wandered. First it was, *What if that wooden thing only records the method and not the cure?*

Then it was, *It makes no difference. As long as they know the mechanism that creates the wu'ergu, the Chen family will figure something out.*

After a pause, he muttered to himself, "Will I really have to go to the National Temple and burn incense for those bald donkeys? Damn it all…"

A stream of random ponderings tumbled through his head, stretching without end. Yet in the next moment, an indescribable burst of longing carved a bloody path through the tangled mess of his thoughts, leaping to the forefront of his mind.

A drop of ink fell from the tip of Gu Yun's brush, snapping him out of his reverie. He pushed the whole mess of military correspondence to the side. Resolving to steal a moment of private joy in the fleeting course of life, he pulled out a fresh piece of letter paper and shamelessly tended to personal affairs during work hours.

In the fourth month of the year, a fragrant spring drew to a close in the Liangjiang region as endless rain boiled up from the river in damp plumes.

Chang Geng had been in Jiangbei for over a month. He'd taken charge of making arrangements for old General Zhong's funeral, after which Fang Qin submitted a memorial recommending the Longan Emperor keep Prince Yan in the south to assist the imperial envoys in their negotiations with the Far Westerners.

Although Prince Yan had officially stepped down from the stage of governance, Fang Qin still found his presence in the capital like a fishbone in the throat. As it was said, a snake will slither up the stick that strikes it—when facing off against a political enemy, one should ensure one lands a single killing blow. But Prince Yan's resignation hadn't been a direct consequence of Fang Qin's machinations; in fact, nothing about that sequence of events had been under his control. Moreover, Prince Yan's status made him a tricky opponent. Aside from treason, few accusations would land him a death sentence.

The best Fang Qin could do was find an excuse to keep him as far away as possible under the guise of assisting their envoys.

Indeed, *assist* was a key word. Prince Yan was not to direct the proceedings; he had responsibilities but no authority. The official envoy would reap the credit for any successes, but any mishaps would open the door to accusing Prince Yan of wrongdoing.

Unfortunately, the world did not move as people wished. The mishaps Fang Qin hoped for never materialized. Prince Yan took to the Jiangbei Garrison like a fish to water, charming everyone he encountered there. He was charismatic to begin with, and twice now he had fought shoulder to shoulder with the garrison troops. The respect the troops had for old General Zhong and Gu Yun further bolstered his position.

The court envoy swiftly read between the lines. Upon arriving in Jiangbei, he took Prince Yan's lead in every particular. Gu Yun was in constant contact via letter, and appeared in person every fortnight or so. Prince Yan accomplished his task of bullying the Far Westerners along the Yangtze's shores with the utmost ease, and engaged in a handful of naval skirmishes while he was at it. He won the court every advantage they desired and trained the soldiers on the side. Even Li Feng couldn't find a thing to complain about. He'd begun to feel that he had rather mistreated Prince Yan—perhaps this was what people meant when they said absence made the heart grow fonder.

Soon enough, however, Fang Qin found himself with no attention to spare for meddling in the Liangjiang region. The expiration date for the first batch of war beacon tickets had arrived, and it was time for them to be paid out.

The first batch of war beacon tickets held a special status. It was no exaggeration to call them the magic elixir that had revived the poverty-stricken dynasty of Great Liang. Without that silver funding Gu Yun's victory in the Western Regions, and with the nation's violet gold supplies exhausted, it would have been only a matter of time before the Far Westerners laid siege to the capital again.

Investors in this first batch of war beacon tickets were therefore important benefactors of the nation. From a standpoint both logical and emotional, this debt must be repaid. If the court failed to produce the money, not only would they lose

the trust of the people, it would be impossible to sell any more war beacon tickets in the future. All the decrees Prince Yan had expended so much effort implementing—declaring war beacon tickets equivalent to gold and silver and requiring merchants to accept them as legal tender—would become so many scraps of paper.

Perhaps some could accept such a state of affairs, but the powerful officials of the court who had held their noses and bought war beacon tickets in batches to keep their black gauze caps during the initial round of government reforms could not. Prince Yan's methods were extreme. He had never balked at using others' hands to slaughter his political enemies; when he wanted to push reforms, he'd carve into anyone's flesh, offending a great number of people in the process… Yet Fang Qin had to admit the prince had been stunningly effective in dragging everyone in the court, friend and foe alike, onto this blasted ship along with him.

The Grand Council's original plans for this moment had been established before the first batch of war beacon tickets ever went on sale. The third batch of tickets was due to go on the market one month before the expiration of the first, enough time for them to sell out based on past experience. They had allotted a portion of the profits from these to repay the debts from the first batch—there ought to have been plenty of leeway both in timing and the sum of the expected funds.

But no one had anticipated that after Prince Yan's departure, the civilian merchants, large and small, would stop buying in.

Once again, the court had underestimated Prince Yan.

The third batch of war beacon tickets faced numerous obstacles from the moment they went on sale. Aside from a few eager officials who bought a handful at the start, the tickets sat unsold. The various chambers of commerce's sudden refusal to cooperate was suspicious, and the wily old foxes in court took it as their signal to follow suit in refusing to empty their pockets. The carrot failed, and so did the stick. The young upstarts in court who enjoyed the support of the thirteen major merchants had by now come into their own, and it was no longer easy to move against them.

The Grand Council implemented the war beacon tickets, but that was where their responsibility ended. The money still flowed in and out of the Ministry of Revenue, headed by Fang Qin. Increasingly desperate, Fang Qin was on the verge of urging his faction to empty their own pockets—but even that would have been a cup of water to a raging fire. Setting aside the question of whether his people were willing to cough up their own money for such a purpose, if they were found to really be sitting on enough silver to buy up those war beacon tickets without blinking, the poor, pedantic scholars of the Imperial Censorate and Department of Supervision who'd never hesitated to excoriate Prince Yan would tear them to bloody shreds in court.

As the date of repayment drew closer, even Li Feng began to fidget on his throne. He personally asked after their progress numerous times and summoned Fang Qin and the members of the Grand Council to the palace for almost a dozen scoldings within a handful of days. Finally unable to bear the pressure, the Six Ministries submitted a joint memorial to the Grand Council inviting Prince Yan back to the capital.

When the decree reached Jiangbei, Chang Geng accepted it with perfect calm, then set about making arrangements for the seamless handover of military authority. He remained aloof to both favor and humiliation, as if he wasn't in the

slightest hurry to return. Only after the second emergency missive arrived did he gather up his luggage and prepare to head north.

News of victory on the northern front arrived as he was about to depart.

The garrison at Jiangbei boiled over. Cries of joy and weeping echoed in Chang Geng's ears as he accepted a letter from the messenger. Some of the letters Gu Yun wrote Chang Geng were simple personal messages, while others contained instructions for Prince Yan on official business. Chang Geng had quickly learned to differentiate them, and could tell whether the correspondence was business or private the instant the envelope was between his fingers. When discussing official matters, Gu Yun would merely set down a few words on a thin sheet of paper. Chang Geng was therefore momentarily disappointed when he accepted the envelope from the Black Hawk: it was flimsy, and must not have contained anything personal.

"Marshal Gu may not yet be aware I'm heading back to the capital today," he said to the Black Hawk. "All the official handovers in Jiangbei have been conducted. I'll trouble you to inform him upon your return."

He didn't bother finding a private spot before opening the letter.

The envelope indeed held only a single sheet of paper. On it, Gu Yun had drawn a hand and written a single line: *Attached, a palm to send to Jiangbei, to measure the span of my intended's waist on my behalf.*

Everyone watched in bemusement as Prince Yan stared at the paper for long minutes, his face slowly turning red.

Chapter 116:
A Furious Sprint

IN THE NINTH YEAR of Longan, Jialai Yinghuo passed away. The Tianlang crown prince inherited the Wolf King's throne and formally declared surrender on behalf of the eighteen tribes. The new Wolf King was granted a noble title as a prince of Great Liang, and accepted the edict with a formal obeisance of three kneels and nine kowtows. The vast and sparsely populated grasslands of the eighteen tribes were folded into Great Liang's northernmost Shuobei Province, and the Tianlang nobles who had joined in the surrender were placed under the jurisdiction of the Shuobei provincial government.

The eighteen tribes would no longer submit annual tribute to Great Liang, and were instead included in the normal system of taxation. The government established a specialized department to mine their vast violet gold fields and manage the transport of the precious fuel.

The entire nation of Great Liang broke out in celebration.

Gu Yun's first obligation was to report back to the capital. Cao Niangzi would return with him while Shen Yi stayed behind in the north to oversee the handover. As for Chen Qingxu, she had copied the entirety of the goddess's secret techniques from the wooden figure and needed to take her time digesting them. She said her farewells, intending to head for the Chen family's estate. Gu Yun pulled her aside before she left. He had wanted to ask if she was confident about finding a cure for the wu'ergu, but realized before he spoke that this was a foolish question. A reliable person like Chen Qingxu would never make overblown claims; at most he could expect a curt *I'll do my best*. But he had nothing much to say besides. He gave her his earnest thanks and said, "It's all up to Miss Chen now."

Chen Qingxu turned aside, refusing to accept his courtesies. In a rare show of loquacity, she said, "Xiao-Cao helped me translate much of it over the past few days. The goddess's secret techniques make no distinction between the study of sorcery and the study of poisons, and many of their stranger practices are merely ceremonial. It is difficult for me to say yet which hold true meaning and which are complete nonsense. Marshal, give me some time."

He was quick to tell her to take all she needed.

Chen Qingxu produced a sealed letter. "I've written down some nourishing prescriptions. A dose or two won't do you any good; you must take them regularly, and allow your body to heal slowly, over time. Marshal, you are suffering a wealth of deficiencies, but this at least is better than nothing. Use your usual medication as sparingly as possible."

Gu Yun accepted the packet with a nod, catching sight of Shen Yi staring impatiently in their direction as he looked back up.

Shen Yi was shooting him a furious glare. Despite their many years of friendship, Gu Yun was surprised to find Shen Jiping's gaze could be spirited enough to scold. The message came through loud and clear: *Since when do you two have so much to talk about?*

Gu Yun rolled his eyes. *Staring daggers from the sidelines; are you hoping a reticent lady like Miss Chen will strike up a conversation with you of her own accord? I swear, the amount of useless trash around here is reaching an unprecedented peak.*

After a heated exchange of glares, Shen Yi broke first and ambled over. He huffed at Gu Yun, "Sir, it's time to go; you mustn't miss the time of your departure."

He turned awkwardly toward Chen Qingxu.

Gu Yun had no desire to stay and watch Shen Yi dither like a man three feet couldn't kick a fart out of. He tapped his horsewhip once against Shen Yi's waist, then swung onto his horse and was off.

By the time Gu Yun reached the capital, news of his victory had spread through the city. Every street and alleyway was filled with crowds eager to catch a glimpse of the famed marshal of the Black Iron Battalion. But their effort was all for naught—the party making their way into the city from the Northern Camp consisted of a few civil officials who had accepted the tribes' surrender on behalf of the court, a representative of the Northern Border Defense Corps, a representative of the Central Plains Army, and some no-name assistant regional commander of the Black Iron Battalion. Gu Yun had slipped home in an unassuming little carriage the night before, and went straight to the palace for an audience with the emperor the following day.

He had once loved parading himself through the streets as the people lining the road tossed enough fruit at him to fill a cart, winking at the prettiest girls until his eyelids hurt. Now he found these things had lost their luster. For one thing, Jiangnan had yet to be recovered; he wasn't shameless enough to cavort through the capital as if the war was won. But more than that, he found he had gradually lost interest in such antics, though he couldn't say exactly when or why. Perhaps he was getting tired, or perhaps he was getting old.

And as for Chang Geng, it seemed to be taking him forever to make his way north. Without him, Gu Yun hadn't much to do in the Marquis Estate aside from listening to his myna bird cuss people out.

Yet neither did he dare kick back, stuff himself with good food, and pass out for three days straight to recover, as a younger man would. Gu Yun no longer had this ability—if he really did unwind that tight coil within his heart, what awaited him was no rise in spirits, but severe illness. Thus, after showing up for roll call with Li Feng, he readied himself to rush straight to Jiangbei.

Master Fenghan arrived just as Gu Yun was preparing to depart and started dragging him off without even sitting for a sip of tea. "Marshal, His Highness Prince Yan sent a letter. He told me I must show you something before you leave."

"What, has Master Fenghan built a giant sea monster of his own?" Gu Yun laughed.

Master Fenghan chuckled but refused to spoil the surprise. A few years ago he had been a decrepit old man without a soul by his side to make his funeral arrangements when he passed—it must have been boredom that had aged him so. Though he now spent his every waking hour in the Lingshu Institute, his face glowed like an ancient tree in belated bloom. One might have thought he'd had a fortuitous encounter with some elegant and beautiful lady his own age. Gu Yun

followed him helplessly into his carriage, taking up the role of a tea-pouring servant to prevent Zhang Fenghan from perishing of dehydration as he launched into animated speech.

"Master Fenghan grows more vigorous with age; it's truly a cause for envy."

Zhang Fenghan deflected the praise and accepted the teacup, grizzled whiskers bouncing as he chuckled. "As long as the court has use for an old thing like me, my life is plenty exciting. Everyone thinks engines and armor are dirty, but I've loved them since I was young. I've made a name for myself in a field I love—isn't that reason enough to rejoice?"

Gu Yun thought it over and conceded him the point. Unfortunately, it wasn't a perspective he could apply himself. Master Fenghan's fervor for engines and armor was understandable, and an official's love of their high status and generous salary was also human nature. But as for Gu Yun, if he were to claim he loved waging war and slaughtering his enemies… That wasn't the sentiment of a sane or normal man. Yet he had chosen this path of his own volition.

Why?

Gu Yun could hardly recall the reason. He remembered how he had hated the thought of going to the borderlands when he was younger. To do so meant leaving his playmates, seeing his scary father every day, and suffering poor food and worse lodgings. He had been pushed onto the battlefield as a teenager by his father's old subordinates, then gotten himself into a moderate amount of trouble in his very first skirmish, before what boyish passion he had could go to his head. Later on, he grew accustomed to days spent eating sand on the borders and enjoyed a few years of youthful arrogance…until Jialai revealed the truth behind the attack on the Black Iron Battalion all those years ago. At that point, any enthusiasm he'd harbored for expanding the borders of the nation had been well and truly extinguished. Now he spent every day merely fulfilling his duties.

While the entire nation basked in the joy of victory on the northern front and the imminent recovery of Jiangnan, the commander of the four borders sat in a swaying carriage with a doddering old man, reflecting on his choices and finding himself at something of a loss. Thinking back on his life, whether it was those times he'd strutted through the streets, flushed with success and stealing the hearts of every beauty along the way, or the times he'd galloped gallantly across the land on iron hooves, looking down on all around him…they were but faded memories.

What he recalled most vividly these days were the moments he'd thought of abandoning it all and throwing his responsibilities aside.

"Marshal, we've arrived," Zhang Fenghan said, recalling him from his thoughts.

In a blink, Gu Yun tucked away those ancient memories and adopted an expectant look to please the old man. "Will you still not tell me what I'm here to see?"

He'd hardly finished speaking when he felt a subtle tremor run through the floor of the carriage beneath his feet, as if something heavy had lumbered its way past. A chorus of shouts came from outside.

Gu Yun jumped down from the carriage and froze, confronted with the sight of a vast metal contraption. "…Could this be that steam locomotive?"

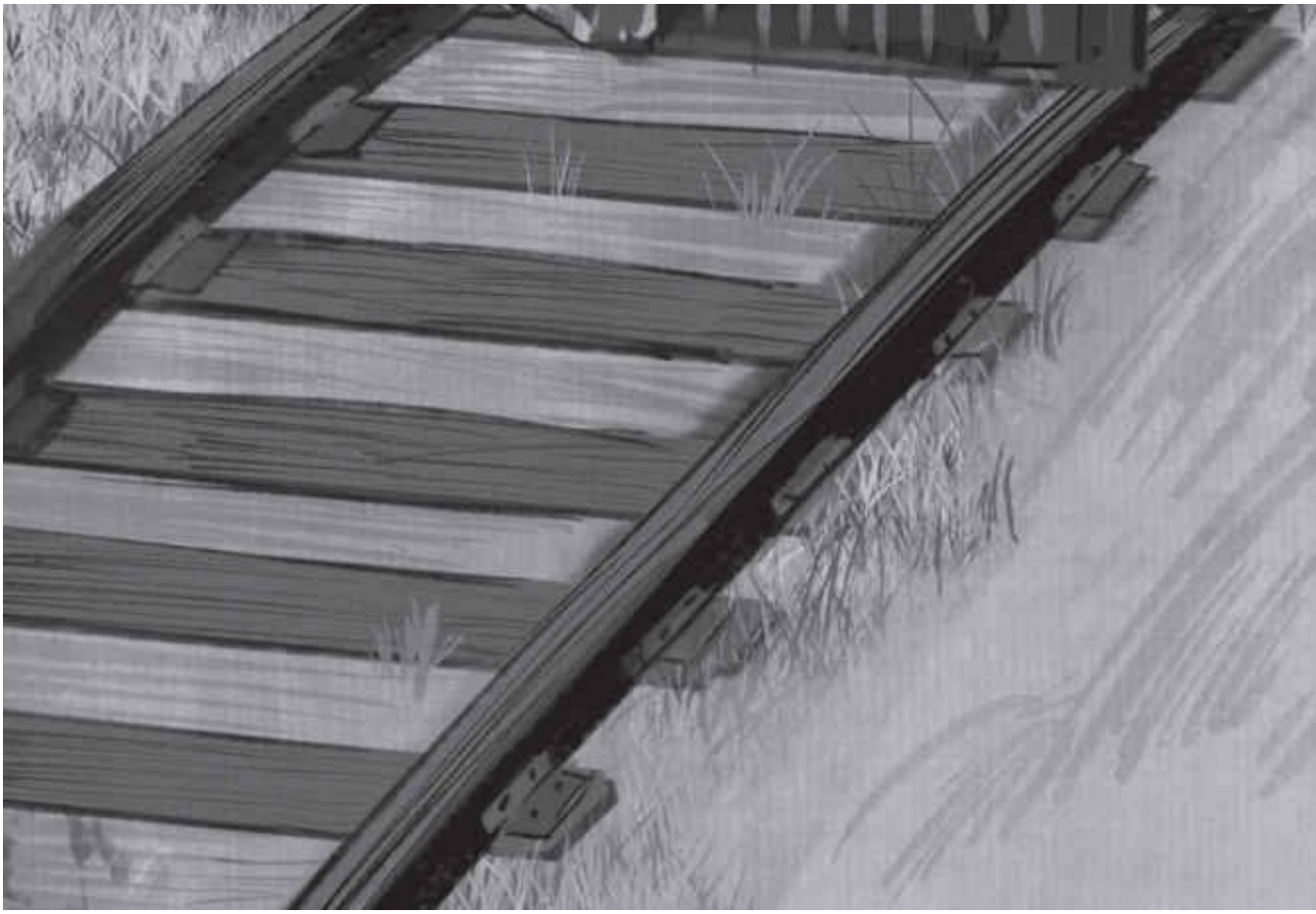
It was as if those schematics he had flipped through on that chilly night had come to life. The head of the enormous locomotive was cast with a lifelike relief of a herd of galloping horses, the leader's mane billowing gallantly in the wind as it reared up in a whinny. Behind it ran a chain of roomy compartments, the complicated mechanisms exposed on the side of each wheel dizzying to the eye. A layman like Gu Yun couldn't begin to guess which were functional and which were merely decorative.

"We're still laying the tracks; this is only a short section used for test runs." Master Fenghan was so excited sweat was beading on the tip of his nose. "Ge Chen! Where did Ge Chen go?"

A small, round face popped out from the window behind the cast metal horses. "Hey, Shifu! Marquis!"

"Show the marshal how our locomotive runs!" Zhang Fenghan bellowed.

Ge Chen stuck his neck out and yelled back, "On it!"



He darted back inside the car. A young Lingshu scholar waved a pair of flags around with the bouncing agility of a monkey, and the steam locomotive slowly came to life. A whiff of that crisp violet gold fragrance only Gu Yun could detect floated over from the trail of steam billowing from the engine's chimney. Unhindered by its long tail of carriages, the locomotive steadily moved faster and faster, until it disappeared from sight.

The maniacal Lingshu scholars around him began to whoop and shout again. Zhang Fenghan had to raise his voice to maintain order. "Quiet! Quiet! Can't you unmannered fools show some dignity in front of the Marquis of Anding?"

No one paid him any mind.

Zhang Fenghan turned to Gu Yun in defeat. "My apologies, Marshal. They've been like this for days; they start screaming every time the locomotive runs and won't calm down no matter what I say." He sighed. "Ay, truth be told, Master Du bought the schematics for this thing at an exorbitant price using his Far Western connections. Whether or not these people were involved in the invasion of our borders I don't know, but they're sly foxes, the lot of them. They redacted several key bits of information; if not for His Highness Prince Yan's hand in the matter, this project would have gotten the axe from on high long ago with all the top-quality iron and black iron we've wasted on it since we began confiscating land along the canal… These boys haven't had an easy time of it. Please don't hold it against them."

Gu Yun stood with his hands clasped behind his back, staring at the point in the distance where the steam locomotive had vanished. He was seized by an urge to scream and shout right along with the Lingshu scholars, but forced himself to maintain a stoic mask for fear of frightening them. His heart, however, had disappeared off into the distance along with the violet-gold-powered train.

Once track was laid along the banks of the canal like a winding artery of steel, the Liangjiang region would no longer be a faraway land beyond the reach of the emperor.

Gu Yun recalled the aspirations Chang Geng had once confessed to him: *I want all the land-bound steam engines to be ones that work the fields, and for the giant kites soaring overhead to be filled with ordinary folks traveling to visit their ancestral homes with their entire families in tow…*

He turned to give Zhang Fenghan a sincere smile. "How fortunate that I never up and quit all these years. Otherwise, how could I have been among the first to witness such a miraculous feat?"

Master Fenghan completely missed the true meaning of his words. He chuckled. "Marshal, you jest."

Gu Yun didn't know how his deeds would go down in history a hundred years hence. He'd stood at the border and suppressed rebellion in the Western Regions not once but twice; he had held the capital on the verge of falling to a siege, and had witnessed the grasslands of the north declare their surrender. And when their first steam locomotive roared off in a cloud of dust…he was there for that too. At this thought, all the worries he'd been fretting over on the way here fell away as if sliced by a blade. He thought with a touch of amusement: it seemed he'd been absolutely everywhere.

The start of the fifth month found Gu Yun making his way south. After learning Prince Yan had taken the official inland road along the canal, he abandoned the idea of flying by armored hawk and took a regiment of light cavalry along the same road. Just as intended, he quite "accidentally" encountered Prince Yan's convoy in the region of Zhili, not far from the capital.

Chang Geng wasn't dawdling on his journey for the sake of it. Like an industrious woodcutter who didn't put off his chopping to sharpen his ax, he met with every single person he needed to see along the way, preparing to stir up a maelstrom the moment he reached the capital. His was a journey of meticulous plotting, and he hadn't held much hope of encountering Gu Yun as the marshal raced south on his own journey. When he heard the report from his subordinates, Prince Yan nearly sprang from his carriage.

They put on a great show of observing all the niceties in front of everyone else, but the instant they reached the relay station inn that was their home for the night and dismissed their attendants, Chang Geng plastered himself to Gu Yun, groping at every bit of him he could reach as he bombarded Gu Yun with questions: "Why are you riding along the official roads? Aren't you tired? Were you injured on the northern border? Give me your wrist… How is your health? Are you eating well? What did Chen Qingxu say?"

Gu Yun lay back and listened as Chang Geng verbally repeated every nagging question he regularly asked in his letters, not impatient in the least. He asked with a grin, "What would you like me to report on first?"

Chang Geng burst out laughing, realizing he had gotten ahead of himself. "Why aren't you traveling by armored hawk for such a long journey?"

"We'll switch at the next military relay station."

Chang Geng started as he caught the implication of Gu Yun's statement. He looked up in shock. "So you did this to…"

"That's right. I've been lying in wait on the roadside to rob His Highness Prince Yan." Gu Yun bracketed Chang Geng's body with his arms as he leaned over him and rested his chin on Chang Geng's shoulder. "If you wish to pass, you'll have to pay the price," he drawled.

Throat bobbing, Chang Geng for some reason recalled that inked palm Gu Yun had sent him from across the country. "What kind of price are you asking? If it's money you want, I have a prince's estate and a villa, a shop for selling all manner of curiosities, and—"

"You're so rich?" Gu Yun affected surprise. "This is the first time I've encountered such a fat lamb in the course of highway robbery, what luck… Very well, I'll have your body as my price!"

Chang Geng laughed and dragged Gu Yun down. He pressed his lips to Gu Yun's ear. "Yifu, you must have seen the steam locomotive by now. What about all those things you promised me?"

Gu Yun promptly backed down. "Look at this mouth of mine; I misspoke. Let me try again—young lad, you'd better take out your wallet."

"I haven't any cash," Chang Geng pouted into his ear. "My man took it all to spend on pleasure and drink. Can't I sell myself to make up for it?"

After his months in the Liangjiang Garrison, Chang Geng's accent had almost fully assimilated to the mellow local dialect. Who knew where he had picked up those soft and misty tones, but as the words *my man* poured into Gu Yun's ear with their dragging tail, a shiver ran down his spine. He was utterly helpless against such charms, and could only give his beloved everything he wanted, allowing his godson to perform every kind of insurrection against him.

They had only this one rushed night together. The morning would see them packing their bags to head off in opposite directions, one to the north and one to the south, like they were changing shifts.

Prince Yan officially returned to court and once again took up his position as head of the Grand Council.

Fang Qin had quietly prepared two memorials to the emperor. If Prince Yan failed to resolve the trouble with the war beacon tickets, he would accuse Prince Yan of bringing disaster upon the nation and its people. His plan to promote the war beacon tickets had been criminally short-sighted, the direct cause of their current predicament. If Fang Qin pushed it, he might even be able to repeal Prince Yan's reforms in governance and return this swamp of a court, with all its vile inhabitants, to its original state.

On the contrary, if those major merchants who had refused to budge at the Ministry of Revenue's request suddenly acquiesced after Prince Yan's appearance and brought them through this disaster, there was also quite a lot Fang Qin could say. Hadn't Prince Yan always labeled himself an upright and unyielding person who never joined factions or sought allegiances? Fang Qin had known the prince conspired with Du Wanquan and his associates since long ago, but had never managed to drum up any solid evidence against them. This was the perfect opportunity to drag them out for a reckoning. An illustrious prince of the first rank, plotting to hand the reins of the nation to these grasping, power-hungry merchants… Merchants who, it was widely known, had sailed overseas on numerous occasions and maintained connections with Far Westerners even now. What, one might very well ask, was the prince planning?

Fang Qin had made complete and thorough preparations. This time, Prince Yan would stand no chance of extricating himself. And whenever he brushed shoulders with Prince Yan in court, and they nodded at each other in acknowledgment, Fang Qin could tell—Prince Yan wasn't planning to spare him either.

Chapter 117:
Layer upon Layer

IN THE TIME Prince Yan had been gone, the conflict between the young upstarts and old aristocrats had crystallized. One side fancied themselves noble and aloof, while the other rode the peak of a meteoric rise. The two were at odds on a fundamental level. At times, the gulf between scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants—the primary social classes of the nation—was even wider than that between the barbarians of the eighteen tribes and the people of Great Liang.

The noble families passed their wealth down through the generations, and all had accumulated plenty of resources. Few were the clans who did not boast sprawling manors or vast tracts of land. After the price of grain plummeted during the Yuanhe era, many noble families quietly began to engage in commerce to supplement their income and fund their social activities. What started as sneaky under-the-table dealings before the time of Emperor Wu had since become accepted as common practice. On the one hand, the increase in nobles dipping their hands into commerce had set the stage for merchants, previously viewed as the lowest tier of society, to set foot in the hallowed halls of politics. But on the other, it dealt constant harm to the civilian merchants who lacked the advantages of status.

Since the time of the founding emperor, Great Liang's laws had prohibited nobles and officials from competing with civilians for profit. Once a merchant held an official government rank, they were no longer a mere merchant. Even if they didn't bully others outright, there were sure to be some malefactors who used such power to their advantage—yet this prohibition hadn't been enforced in years. In short, the grudge between the old noble families and the new upstarts had been fermenting for far longer than the span of a single reign.

The upstarts who had found their way onto the stage were like underdogs finally having their day in the sun. Only one side could come out on top in the end, so the old noble families would try to beat them back with all their might, adding new insult atop old injury. They had managed to hold their noses and work in concert when the nation was under threat. But now that the barbarians had bowed their heads, and they had a hand free in Jiangnan—now that the war was no longer such a pressing concern—the labor pains from the birth of this new court made themselves known.

Prince Yan had no time to settle back into his role before he was swept up in a savage free-for-all in the first grand assembly he attended.

Starting from the major question of whether or not to abolish the war beacon tickets, they argued their way to the many shortcomings of the new government reforms, then circled back around to attack the Canal Commission. The debate raged from the rights of princes to the rights of civilians, from regulations on civilian merchants to precedents set by their ancestors. Eventually, the flames of this verbal war spread all the way to the military. From a discussion about the regional garrisons' spending, the conversation ran like a wild horse bucking against its reins toward the question of whether or not they ought to keep fighting over Jiangnan at all. Fang Qin and his faction had hit upon Prince Yan's weakness. If they hadn't poured enormous expenses into the war over the past few years, leaving

the treasury screaming poverty, Prince Yan would never have had the chance to prioritize opportunities for profit and throw the court into its current state of disarray.

One noble official stepped forward to stir up trouble: “Your Majesty, now that the eighteen tribes have surrendered, a bounty of violet gold will fill our stores and coffers. We are slowly recovering our strength within our borders. We oughtn’t wage a new war for the next three or five years. The terms of peace the Far Westerners have offered seem sincere. As long as they retreat from the Yangtze River and surrender the territory they have occupied, opening a harbor for the Far Westerners along the shores of the East Sea is an acceptable compromise. We can achieve peace for the common people of Jiangnan and build a hub for overseas trade at the same time. Why shouldn’t we agree? Marshal Gu has found fault with the foreigners’ every gesture and insisted on adding countless extra conditions—nothing will please him.”

A member of Prince Yan’s faction spoke up in opposition: “Why should we hand over a single square meter of the fertile land along the East Sea to a troop of Far Western monkeys? Are we incapable of operating our own harbors? Have we no merchant ships and traders of our own to fill them? You would give the land of our ancestors to the Far Westerners just like that. Our court truly has no one more generous than you!”

This time, Fang Qin personally entered the fray. He avoided making any thorny implications about betraying the nation or colluding with foreign forces and calmly stated, “The Far Westerners sailed here from across the sea. The bulk of the supplies their army requires must be shipped from thousands of kilometers away, and their soldiers are tired and far from home. As this subject sees it, we needn’t treat them as a major threat to our borders. We can make overtures of peace, and they will run themselves dry in eight to ten years. Marshal Gu has worked himself to the bone for our Great Liang, plagued these last years by injury and illness. Oughtn’t he spend some days in comfort, free from worry? If only out of concern for the hundreds of thousands of soldiers like him bathing in blood on the front lines, we should call a ceasefire to rest and regroup. The matter of Jiangnan can be discussed in more detail later. Prince Yan, as for the war beacon tickets…what are your plans?”

Prince Yan, who had been listening quietly from the sidelines all this time, glanced up at Fang Qin. “I see no reason to table the discussion of the Far Westerners’ terms. The war beacon tickets were named after signals used in battle; they have been tied to the war since their inception. If my esteemed colleagues here today wish to make peace by feeding our land to hungry tigers and wolves, there is no reason to distribute the third batch of tickets. Use the next five years of the court’s tax income as collateral; I’m sure you’ll be able to raise the spare change needed to repay our debts.”

Fang Qin shook his head with a small smile. “Prince Yan speaks out of anger. How is calling for a ceasefire surrendering our land to tigers and wolves? We have beaten back the Far Westerners again and again; their terms are simply a discreet form of surrender. Once we push them back out to the sea, they will be no better than floating duckweed—hardly a threat to our heartland.”

Chang Geng smiled as well. His tone was mild, with no heat behind it. “Minister Fang displays a remarkable understanding of the state of the world for having never stepped out his own front door. From a thousand kilometers away, he

has determined that the Far Westerners are on their last legs—such acute insight is beyond the capabilities of one such as myself."

Watching this increasingly acrimonious exchange, Li Feng was compelled to intervene. "Military decisions lie with military officials. We summoned you here to discuss the pressing matter of the war beacon tickets. Why are you arguing about the war in Liangjiang? You haven't managed to finish balancing your accounts, yet here you are worrying about peace terms—A-Min, you too should hold your tongue."

Right on cue, the Assistant Minister of Revenue stepped forward. "His Highness Prince Yan has just returned from Jiangbei. Perhaps he does not yet understand the obstacles we've encountered with the third batch of war beacon tickets. Your Highness, you must know that while the salaries of our government's civil and military officials are generous compared to those of the previous reign, we have elderly parents and young children to support. Our meager salaries allow us to maintain merely a degree of basic dignity. Which of us dares pursue sumptuous wealth? Especially now, when our nation needs us, we of course have the desire to come to its aid—but not the ability. Since the purchase of war beacon tickets became a factor in the official evaluations, how many have emptied their coffers? We can no longer produce a single coin. Your Highness, you maintain a close personal relationship with Du Wanquan and his associates in the various chambers of commerce. Can you not speak on our behalf and request their contribution one more time?"

Chang Geng wasn't about to step into such an obvious trap. "I paid a number of visits to Master Du and his fellow merchants on my way to the capital," he replied evenly. "The factories along the canal are in their initial stages of construction. Our nation's upstanding merchants are taking care of our refugees. Their expenses are immense, and they have invested over half their fortune into the new Canal Commission. Even if they were willing to spend themselves into ruin to save us from our predicament, do you propose they also give up on the refugees who have finally found new homes? To tell the truth, Master Du's exact words to me were also that he has no more left in his pockets."

"Your Highness," Fang Qin said, dogged. "Did this possibility really not occur to you when you first promoted the war beacon tickets with such full-throated support?"

Chang Geng leveled him with a cool look. "Minister Fang, I spoke quite clearly back then. We would first borrow the money, and when the period of two years was up and the national treasury caught its breath, we would arrange our finances to pay off our debts. If we were still struggling at that point, we could sell a third batch of war beacon tickets to resolve the most pressing deficit. Back when we were calculating this income stream to the national treasury, Minister Fang was already the head of the Ministry of Revenue. You had no objections then, yet now you stand here interrogating me. In that case, I have a question for Minister Fang as well: where has all the money coming into the Ministry of Revenue gone? Why are we short by so much?"

Fang Qin finally lost his temper. "Every transaction is recorded in our ledgers. If Prince Yan has suspicions, I urge you to examine them yourself!"

"That's right." Chang Geng plastered a fake smile on his face. "Our esteemed colleagues in the Ministry of Revenue could never be so incompetent as to forget how to balance an account book. Then perhaps Minister Fang was briefly possessed

and made an error in his calculations?"

"That's enough!" Li Feng snapped.

Fang Qin hurriedly voiced his apologies. Chang Geng dipped a shallow bow and stepped mulishly off to the side. He mostly kept silent at court assemblies, letting his subordinates speak on his behalf, and rarely got into these kinds of direct altercations. Fang Qin couldn't resist shooting him a look. Something wasn't right.

Prince Yan must have some plan to handle the awkward situation the war beacon tickets had created. Why would he rather bicker in front of the emperor than produce it? What sort of setup was this?

The grand assembly unhappily adjourned. Li Feng bade Prince Yan stay, and he walked behind Li Feng in silence as they left the main hall. Li Feng's broken leg had healed, but he suffered lingering complications. He would begin to limp if he walked too fast.

"Come take a stroll in the gardens with us," Li Feng said.

By coincidence, the crown prince had just finished his lessons and was playing in the gardens with the third prince. He obediently ran over to offer his father and youngest uncle a bow as they entered. The crown prince was growing by the year, and now sported the gangly proportions of early adolescence. The third prince, meanwhile, was merely five years old and still in the process of losing his baby teeth, air whistling through the gaps as he talked.

Upon seeing the children, Li Feng couldn't resist asserting some fatherly authority. He found a flimsy excuse to scold the crown prince, then quizzed him on his studies with a severe expression. The crown prince offered proper responses at first, but couldn't resist sneaking glances at his younger brother by the end. Li Feng followed the direction of his gaze and found himself torn between laughter and tears.

The gap-toothed third prince was too young yet to weather his father's interrogations. He had stood off to the side, silent as a cicada in winter, until Prince Yan had beckoned him away. By the time Li Feng looked over, they were both sitting on the ground. Prince Yan had pulled a few grass stalks and woven the child a grasshopper. When would a child raised in the deepest recesses of the palace have ever seen this kind of country delight? The third prince's eyes were round as saucers as he stared at it. Before long, the little boy had a straw grasshopper in his left hand and a straw katydid in his right, so overjoyed he forgot to hide his missing front tooth as he laughed aloud.

"…Infatuation with trifles destroys the will," Li Feng scolded.

He shot Chang Geng a glare, then dismissed the two children despite their obvious reluctance. Li Feng watched from afar as the third prince raised himself onto his tiptoes and pressed a straw katydid into his brother's palm. The crown prince took the child's newly freed hand, and the two of them briefly looked like a pair of brothers from any ordinary family, the elder leading the younger.

The crown prince was warm and gentle in temperament, much like his grandfather. Li Feng felt a rare surge of sentiment; when he turned back to Chang Geng, his expression had unconsciously softened. "After all this time, do you still not wish to marry?"

Chang Geng's smile dimmed.

Li Feng sighed. “What if Dage takes responsibility and selects a child from the clan for you to adopt? You should have someone to perform filial duties and care for you in your later years.”

Rubbing his grass-stained fingers together, Chang Geng looked in the direction the third prince had gone off in. Some emotion seemed to cross his face. But after the moment had passed, he repeated his refusal. “Thank you, Brother, but there’s no need.”

“Any child you raise will inherit a title in the future—they’ll be a commandery prince at minimum, without a single achievement to their name. With such prospects as these, what parent wouldn’t be willing?” Li Feng said. “You needn’t worry whether it would be immoral to take someone’s child.”

Chang Geng suddenly bowed very low. “Your Majesty, this subject wishes to follow in the footsteps of the Lord of Shang.[1] I have no intention of dragging any children or grandchildren down with me.”

The corner of Li Feng’s eye twitched. He turned to look at him in silence.

Chang Geng remained stubbornly bent at the waist. He was young and strong, yet looked somehow desolate. *This subject wishes to follow in the footsteps of the Lord of Shang*—to reform the law and push for change at any cost, to be hated and scorned by the world, and drawn and quartered in the public market…to become the spent ash of coals used to fuel the fire of a new era.

Li Feng dismissed the palace attendants. No one knew what the Li brothers spoke about in the garden that day from noon until dusk, when Prince Yan finally left the palace. All that remained were those stalks of grass that had been picked clean to make straw bugs, baldly minding their own business.

The next day, Jiang Chong received a note with instructions from Prince Yan: *Don’t let the Marquis of Anding return to the capital. The fighting can stop, but he must stay in Liangjiang.*

The rains of Jiangnan could be terribly cruel. Just a few days ago, the heat had made it impossible to sleep at night, but after a sudden downpour, the air became so humid the damp could burrow into a man’s bones.

Mister Ja wiped his face as he climbed the iron stairs extending out from the frightful hull of the Far-Western sea monster. On the landing above stood an old man with a shock of white hair, his back to Mister Ja. He was leaning over something, his waist curled like a burnt strip of bamboo.

Mister Ja cleared his throat. “Your Holiness, what brings you here so late?”

“Sleep abandons the aged.” The pope beckoned him over. “Come, take a look at this.”

A field scope was mounted atop the sea monster—not one of those little gadgets that could be attached to the bridge of one’s nose, but a device over a meter in length, cast of copper and secured to the floor of the ship with a triangular base. The copper barrel was carved with rings and rings of complex inscriptions in the Far Western alphabet.

This field scope provided a truly vast field of vision, bringing objects hundreds of kilometers away into clear focus. With the aid of this instrument, the pope could peer into Great Liang’s territory even from atop the great sea monster in

the East Sea.

In the few short years since the start of the war, the once-silent stretches of fertile soil on Jiangbei's shore had begun to burn with an unquenchable light each night. The brightest and most densely packed were the harsh lights of the watchtowers of the local garrison. The ones farther back were gentler—the lights of the night guards in the newly constructed factories. They didn't quite make for a bustling scene, but from a distance, they looked like a handful of stars scattered across the land.

"Your Holiness, what do you see?" Mister Ja asked, puzzled. "Has the enemy made any unusual moves?"

"The enemy is always making unusual moves," the pope said softly. "Our leaders in the Holy Empire let their own greed lead them here, and now they're placing unfounded hopes on the peace talks. We've lost the first-mover's advantage, and have retreated again and again. Our flagship has withdrawn into the open sea, and Great Liang will likely attempt to cut our supply lines soon. Who knows what we'll do when it comes to that."

"Did we not have a strategy in mind when we retreated to the coast?" Mister Ja asked. "The islands of Dongying can serve as a base for resupplying, and our ships can take a longer sea route. The Great Liang folk may have copied our more agile tiger sharks, but their fleet is still not suited to combat in open water."

"The people of Dongying are like a pack of wild dogs. When you hold the upper hand, they'll come begging for scraps of carrion without a moment's hesitation. But as soon as you lose your advantage, don't expect to keep their loyalty." The pope sighed. "Besides, are you so certain Great Liang is ill-suited for combat on the high seas? A few years ago they didn't even have a proper navy, and now look at them. How can you hinge your victory on the precondition of your enemy's weakness?"

Mister Ja fell silent a moment. "But Your Holiness, the holy emissary…"

"That is exactly why I summoned you." The pope produced a letter from his pockets. His hand trembled like a leaf in autumn, but his expression was hard, without a hint of its usual compassion. "A letter from the homeland. See for yourself."

Mister Ja snatched it, a look of shock coming over his face. "This… Can this be true?"

The pope's voice was a low rumble. "There's a sea change in the Holy Empire."

The liberal faction had violently ousted their conservative peers, toppling the delicate political balance once and for all. They had conscripted tens of thousands of men from vassal states to march on the Holy Empire in revolt, fomenting a riot and dethroning the king. The rebels had sent more than thirty members of the old nobility to their death, including the heir apparent, and raised a pathetic little distant relative of the late king onto the throne.

It took a few days for the royalists to make their belated response. The new king wore his crown for scarcely a full week before he, too, was forced off the throne.

The political future of the Holy Empire was murky as a swamp—anything could happen. The holy emissary, loyal to the late king, was now powerless, while

the royalists were furiously attempting to ingratiate themselves with the Church that the late king had neglected over half his life. At least for now, the powers at home wouldn't be causing them any trouble. Mister Ja was a keen man; he instantly grasped the crux of this new situation.

The pope whipped around, staring at him with hawklike eyes. "This is an opportunity, do you understand?"

Mister Ja lowered his voice to a charged whisper. "The holy emissary…"

The pope inclined his head minutely. His tone was amiable, yet his mild words hid a freezing cold. "He is the holy emissary no longer."

Mister Ja sucked in a breath, rubbing his hands together beneath his richly embroidered sleeves. "I'll prepare right away."

"Ja." The pope folded his wizened hands inside his sleeves as he braced himself against the night breeze. "If we let this opportunity slip, we may not see another. The beast that is Great Liang has already awoken."

Mister Ja looked back toward the distant shore. Recalling the lantern light he had seen, his heart trembled, and he left in a hurry.

That night, unbeknownst to the people of Great Liang, the storm winds of revolt tore through the Far Western army. When the holy emissary received the news from his homeland, it took less than an incense stick's time for him to decide to flee. No one could accuse him of being slow to act.

Unfortunately, he had no idea the message had been intercepted before it reached him. It also took less than an incense stick's time for him and his fleeing troops to be secretly captured by the pope's personal guard, who had long been lying in wait.

Mister Ja executed the holy emissary and his men on the spot. He sent the man's ship on its way, as if he had simply departed after a job well done. Then he carefully suppressed any news of the turmoil inside the Holy Empire. Within the quiet harbor occupied by the Far Westerners, ordinary soldiers went on their ordinary patrols, knowing only that the holy emissary had been summoned back to the homeland, and that they took orders from only one master yet again.

The pope continued to concede in their negotiations with Great Liang. On the surface, they retreated step by step until the day of the Autumn Equinox in the ninth year of Longan, when a batch of military supplies from overseas sailed into the Far Western harbor. The violet gold and other provisions quietly pressed their weight into the scorched earth of Jiangnan's shore like a gathering of dark ghosts.

Chapter 118:
Old Foe

GREAT LIANG SPENT the entirety of the ninth year of Longan shrouded in the scent of gunpowder.

At the end of the fifth month, Prince Yan, acting as the representative of the court, met with the thirteen virtuous merchants who had made the first batch of war beacon tickets a success to declare their expiration. At the same time, he announced the establishment of the Longan Bank, personally approved by Li Feng. This institution would be headquartered in the capital, and its branches established across the nation to handle the collection and cashing out of expired war beacon tickets. Local officials would shoulder these responsibilities in the interim.

The next day, the newly minted Longan Bank announced several options for cashing out war beacon tickets. Holders could exchange the tickets for silver on the spot, or they could open an account at the Longan Bank. There they could exchange the value of their tickets for the same value in silver deposited at the bank and instead take home Longan banknotes, which would be put into immediate use throughout the nation. They could even exchange the notes for shares in the government-owned factories operated by the Canal Commission. The prices of these shares were clearly laid out in a thick booklet. Fang Qin and his allies ground their teeth at the sight—Prince Yan had obviously planned this long in advance.

Banks were nothing new to Great Liang. There were private banks run by civilians and official ones the government used to process payments for international trade. The Longan Bank had absorbed many of these government-run banks upon its establishment, some of them by force. Prince Yan had abandoned his former gentle and elegant image. Ever since his return to the court, it was as if he had been possessed, growing madder by the day.

The imperial merchants who ran these government banks, despite their title, were backed mostly by influential noble families and not the throne. They tended to remember the *imperial* part only when they wanted to throw their weight around and saw themselves as mere merchants when they sought to fill their pockets. They had no scruples about blurring the lines between public and private affairs, and their account books were equal parts mud and water. A full three days and nights wouldn't have been enough to untwist the thorny thicket of their entangled lines of profit. They were all accustomed to treating government business as their own personal enterprise. Who among them had imagined the skies would turn overnight and a certain prince would snatch the enterprises they had worked so hard to build out from under them?

Every court assembly between the fifth and eighth month was as chaotic as a flock of chickens set loose in the market. The director of one of the government banks was first to stick his neck out and resist, only for someone else to immediately produce evidence of the director's fraud and embezzlement. He was consigned to the dungeons, and his assets seized for investigation. His wife, weak of constitution in the first place, happened to be with child. After running around for days on end dealing with the fallout, she suffered a miscarriage that cost her both the baby and her life. The woman's mother had been granted a title by the late

emperor—on her seventieth birthday, the late emperor had personally written a plaque declaring her a "star of longevity." Her daughter had arrived late in life, and she cherished the girl like nothing else; how could she bear this in silence? Brandishing the late emperor's plaque, she threatened to hang herself on the spot.

Every duke and marquis in the capital wished they could drag Prince Yan out and flay him.

Fang Qin cleverly directed the point of his spear not at the imperial scion Prince Yan himself, but at the Grand Council. He organized members of his faction throughout the Six Ministries to submit a furious joint memorial containing sixteen separate accusations against the Grand Council and an impassioned statement requesting the emperor disband what should have been a temporary wartime institution. The Grand Council wasn't helpless; it naturally fought back. In the blink of an eye, both sides had unearthed every dusty indiscretion they could find and tossed them onto center stage, the entire court bristling with blades both visible and concealed, locked in a struggle to the death. Even those who weren't directly involved caught a few stray arrows as they tried to sneak along the sidelines.

As mid-autumn approached, the conflict reached a white-hot blaze. Even a man as cautious as Jiang Chong found himself accused of one wrongdoing or another, and had been placed on leave from his post pending investigation. Everyone knew the emperor was quietly protecting Prince Yan despite the unbiased image he put on for the court. Otherwise, how could the prince have stayed so steady in the midst of this political storm?

The chaos persisted until the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Li Feng was attending the imperial family banquet in the inner palace, as was customary. On the way, he encountered the third prince. Even the strictest father would soften toward such a young child. Li Feng called the boy over with a rare gentleness and led him by the hand. The third prince feared his father no less than his elder brothers did, and dared not utter a single word even as he stretched his hand up and scurried forward to keep up with his father's long strides. Within a few steps, his little face was flushed with exertion.

It was a palace attendant who reminded Li Feng on the boy's behalf. Only then did Li Feng look down and see the anxious look on his son's young face. For some reason, he was struck by the memory of Prince Yan sitting on the grass, weaving straw insects for this child so very recently.

"Summon Prince Yan to the palace for the family banquet," Li Feng said to a palace attendant.

The attendant hastened off. But after running there and back again, he returned without the person he had gone to summon. "Your Majesty, this servant was unable to find His Highness Prince Yan."

Li Feng frowned. "He wasn't in the office of the Grand Council?"

"Minister Jiang has been wrapped up in some trouble, and there have been calls to disband the Grand Council," the attendant explained, selecting his words with care. "His Highness has placed his own work on hold, saying he ought to avoid suspicion… Isn't his official apology still on your desk?"

Li Feng rubbed at the crease between his brows. He remembered now. "You didn't go to his home? The Prince Yan Estate? Or the Marquis of Anding's estate…"

"I did," the attendant said quietly. "The servants said His Highness has quit the city and gone to the National Temple. He's staying with Great Master Liao Ran."

Li Feng was stunned. The night of the Mid-Autumn Festival was a time for families to reunite, yet Prince Yan, a prince of the first rank and second in status only to the emperor himself, was sitting by his lonesome beneath an impoverished monk's dim lantern and an ancient Buddha…all as a gang of agitators tried every trick in the book to drag him down.

The thought gnawed at Li Feng's heart.

He had been moved by Chang Geng's declaration of his intent to follow in the ways of the Lord of Shang, yet the trouble Prince Yan caused with his extreme tactics also gave Li Feng a persistent headache. He had pursued the accusations against Jiang Chong as a warning to the prince about his conduct. But Prince Yan was still a member of the Li family. Even if he tended to go too far, everything he had done was to plug up the holes in the court. In the end, every meter of the land belonged, above all, to its ruler. The emperor hadn't spoken on the matter, yet these officials and nobles were champing at the bit to toss accusations around. Did they think themselves above the imperial family?

Previously, although Li Feng knew Wang Guo had done wrong, he had protected the imperial uncle within the palace when the furious Tan Hongfei and the Northern Camp charged in to interrogate him. Li Feng was, by nature, amenable to coaxing but not to coercion. He was willing to intervene to keep the powers within his court in balance, but it was another matter entirely when all the major noble families were joining forces to target Prince Yan.

Certain people have taken this too far, Li Feng thought to himself.

Yet before this seed could sprout within the emperor's heart, on that very evening, a crisis erupted far away across the nation. The Far Western navy, which had retreated to a harbor along the coast of the East Sea, had sent the Jiangbei Garrison an insincere holiday present just the day before. Before the dew could dry on that incongruous gift of fresh flowers, they launched an attack—a premeditated, full-scale assault on Great Liang's Liangjiang Garrison.

After Gu Yun took command in Liangjiang, he had done his utmost to bring the patrol and defense of the local garrison up to the Black Iron Battalion's standard. While the court had been busy fighting fires in its own backyard, the dragon, hawk, and light and heavy armor divisions in Jiangbei all stood at full combat readiness, despite their outward appearance of leisure.

That night, the western watchtower, which had been keeping a close eye on enemy movements, was first to notice the shift in the Western navy. They lit their alert lantern at once. Beams of white light speared through the pitch-black water of the Yangtze like parhelion arrows, and the dragonets of the vanguard glided into formation before they'd even heard their commander's order. Great iron booms rose in the water closer to shore. At the same time, a messenger in hawk armor flew straight from the watchtower to the commander's tent.

On the Western flagship, Mister Ja burst into the pope's cabin, chest heaving. "Your Holiness, they have been closely surveilling us. We've been discovered."

“That is to be expected.” The pope didn’t raise his eyes. “Last time, their commander had just passed away and they had yet to hand over the garrison; we launched a successful sneak attack then through a stroke of luck. Now that Gu Yun has taken charge, we can no longer rely on good fortune. Go on now. They’ve discovered us already; let’s give our old foe a proper greeting.”

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before a messenger was rushing out to relay his orders.

Mister Ja frowned. “Your Holiness, I was thinking…is this really the right time? Why can’t we wait a little longer? Great Liang is embroiled in a political power struggle much like the Holy Empire. If we wait, perhaps an opportunity will reveal itself…”

A great roar from outside interrupted him—the fast and agile ships of the Western vanguard had opened fire.

These opening volleys launched the battle into unstoppable motion. Explosions boomed from every direction; with a shudder, Mister Ja realized he must turn his attention to the battlefield. He had suffered heavy losses at Gu Yun’s hands before. The pope glanced away from the field scope and turned to Mister Ja. “I had a premonition that this would be our best opportunity—full speed ahead!”

The sea monster slashed through the icy water with a roar like a great black shadow. After lying in wait salivating for so long, it once again bared claws and fangs as it charged toward Great Liang’s shores.

Yet this time, Great Liang’s navy was no longer the weakling it had been.

In the Liangjiang Garrison, a sentry stepped into the place of one of his fallen comrades. Sentries were the eyes and ears of the army, but it was this young man’s first time serving in this capacity. When he heard the report of guns and cannons behind his back, he activated his hawk armor in a panic and launched into a violet-streaked dive. He hit the ground running and, carried by his momentum, sprinted some dozen steps until a light cavalryman on patrol near the commander’s tent managed to grab hold of him.

“Emergency military report! I need to speak to the marshal…” The flustered sentry fell silent as the man propping him up patted him on the head. He looked up, startled, to find that the person whom he had mistaken for a soldier on guard duty was Gu Yun in the flesh.

“No need to fear; we’ve defeated them before.” Gu Yun gave the young sentry’s shoulder a bracing squeeze and smiled. “Come—let’s meet our adversary.”

Within the space of this exchange, every armored infantryman and light cavalryman had finished gearing up. Purple flames from the armored hawks sparked in the darkness of the night. At a long whistle from Gu Yun, the aerial assassins surged, bloodthirsty, into the air.

“Dragon warships and dragonets, formations of three and five. Move out!”

“Hawks, mount parhelion bows on the iron booms.”

“…What else was there?” Gu Yun slung his windslasher over his back like a fashion accessory and rubbed his chin in thought. “Oh, right—one more thing. Go fetch the ‘dessert’ the Lingshu Institute sent us. When we’re tired from all the fighting, we can give our foreign friends a little something extra to chew on.”

The attack from the Far Western army was sudden, but the Liangjiang Garrison's response was that of a well-oiled machine.

On one side was the pope, who had rallied his forces after sailing clear across the ocean from the Holy Empire and fighting his way tooth and nail to this decisive moment. On the other was the Marquis of Order, a veritable folk hero. At last they found themselves face-to-face, their forces matched in strength, with no meddlers around to interfere.

This battle could have only one victor.

Gu Yun wasn't Chang Geng, a young man who could take to the battlefield with nothing more than the fire in his blood. He methodically laid out his troops on both land and sea, mixing genuine attacks with feints to test the enemy's strength as he attempted to surround and detain the enemy flagship.

But this time, he found an opponent who met him blow for blow. The general at the helm was no longer Mister Ja, that coward who'd run at anything you dangled in front of him, but an old and spicy chunk of ginger. Gu Yun tested him a few times, nearly managing to lure his adversary's right flank into a chase with a series of quick attacks by a formation of dragonets, but the enemy flagship lurking within the bulk of their forces reacted swiftly each time to restore their formation.

The Western sea monster looked clumsy, but the vessel's defense was impregnable, weapons bristling from every centimeter of its surface. Its ugly iron carapace yawned open to reveal one cannon muzzle after another. The cavernous bowels of the sea monster stored an unimaginable amount of violet gold and ammunition. With such a vessel in the fleet, enemy hawks could land and refuel at any time, allowing them to pin their opponents down from the air across the battlefield. At the same time, from his secure position in the center of the fleet, the sea monster's commander could direct and consolidate the surrounding dragon warships with ease. The great ship was like a queen bee, gathering all of its drones into a seamless whole even if most of them were rather dim or varied vastly in ability.

"See that?" Gu Yun pointed, speaking to Yao Zhen. "That hulking giant in the center has taken direct control instead of giving their flanks autonomy—I'd say that pope finally made their little troublemaker walk the plank."

Worry was written in every line of Yao Chongze's face. "Marshal, they've been the ones shamelessly suing for peace. Why attack us now?"

Gu Yun licked his lips. "I'm guessing they've had some news from home—something's given them a shot of courage. I'm starting to get a handle on that old bastard's style. He likes to start with a bombardment—a test of his enemy's defenses—and adjusts his strategy as soon as it fails. But look, he's got something up his sleeve today. He wouldn't go all in like this if he didn't have supplies to back him up. Their supply lines probably swing around the open seas and run through the Dongying archipelago, where our defenses are weak."

Yao Zhen was the clear-headed sort; he grasped Gu Yun's meaning at once. "Marshal, if that is true, we can't afford to fight him head-on like this. The railway is still under construction; even if we request supplies now, they may not come in time. What should we do?"

The Far Western army's violent bombardment filled the river and sea, igniting the surface of the water until it looked like the lowest level of hell. Violet

gold burned to thin trails of white steam in the bellies of these iron beasts like it didn't cost a cent, rising into the air along with the tiny impurities and smoke. A layer of mist rose to cover the bright moon and stars in the sky, then gathered into heavy clouds. As the two armies struggled into the latter half of the night, it began to rain.

A messenger jogged over. "Sir, the cuttlefish submersibles are ready!"

"Dragons, tighten that formation; all hawks board the flagship and prepare to weigh anchor." Gu Yun threw a glance back at Yao Zhen as he strode toward the command vessel. "Chongze-xiong, you hold the fort onshore; there's no need to follow me further."

Yao Zhen let out a ringing laugh. "Perhaps I've been a coward in the past, but what have I to fear with the marshal at my side?"

Despite his confident declaration, Governor Yao found himself regretting his words soon enough as he struggled to keep down his gorge on the swaying deck of the ship. The Lingshu Institute had refitted the flagship's propulsion system according to Gu Yun's specifications, and the craft was a white streak among the waves, nearly as fast as the smaller dragonets that sailed like the wind.

Command ships were ordinarily steadier vessels, but this was not the case under Gu Yun. Even if he flew to the heights of absurdity, the thousands of dragon warships and dragonets of the fleet bent to his every command.

Wary of underestimating their enemy, the Western navy turned out in full force, attempting to intercept and encircle Great Liang's ships. In this, the Western navy's impenetrable formations became a hindrance instead of a help. Gu Yun had an excellent grasp of the rhythm of battle, advancing and retreating in turns. The instant the enemy concentrated their fire on any given spot, his ships would scatter and reform elsewhere moments later, like a keen blade held to the enemy's neck, forcing them to dance to his tune.

Gradually, every command coming from the Western sea monster was followed by the words "hold steady."

But this was no easy battlefield to hold.

Gu Yun quickly located the weakest section of the Far Western fleet. Rallying his ships, he sharpened Great Liang's navy into a dagger and streaked toward it. The Western sea monster was too cumbersome to respond with quickness; the pope was forced to his last resort. "Flagship, open all shutters, load the heavy cannons; all other vessels clear out—"

Across the water, Gu Yun smiled at Yao Zhen. "There's much we can learn from the design of this Western sea monster. But I never ordered one from the Lingshu Institute—while we have the right idea in theory, our engineering skills are not quite up to the task. Maybe in a decade or two, we can make a better one…"

He trailed off, distracted by the sight of the Western dragon warships, which had been closely encircling the sea monster, fleeing in all directions.

"There's our opening," Gu Yun said. "Cuttlefish, get moving!"

"Marshal!" Yao Zhen cried out in alarm. "Forget the opening! Look out!"

The Western sea monster raised its ink-black shell, revealing a row of heavy cannon muzzles.

Gu Yun didn't blink. "Alter course due southwest and full speed ahead. Fire at will; these tiny ships can't stop us!"

Two thunderous booms sounded in a quick staccato, nearly merging into a single roar. The Great Liang fleet opened fire, short-barrel cannons blasting through the fleeing Western dragonets to charge unimpeded into enemy waters. Artillery fire from the Western flagship followed, brushing dangerously close to their hulls. Gu Yun's flagship shuddered, and Yao Zhen clung to a mast with all four limbs. Gu Yun lost his balance on the bucking deck and crashed into a wall.

"Marshal!" Yao Zhen's voice was tight with fright.

Gu Yun shook his head and crawled up, unbothered, a frightening gleam in his eye. "It's time for dessert."

Water surged and fell under the bombardment of artillery fire; no one on the Western ships noticed the peculiarly shaped dragon warships gliding toward them beneath the waves. These were the so-called cuttlefish submersibles, freshly delivered from the Lingshu Institute. The most daring tactical unit among seafaring dragons, they could travel completely underwater, and their pilots could bail out after locking in their bearing. The warships that carried the cuttlefish pulled the pilots back up via ropes, while the unmanned vessel would shoot forward at its original speed until it detonated upon collision with its target in the water. These had been specially designed for the enormous sea monster and its significant draft, untouchable by attacks above the waterline.

One side of the Far Westerners' rock-solid front line crumbled to nothing beneath Gu Yun's charge; a moment later, a plume of water shot dozens of meters into the air. Fire flickered across the surface of the waves, and before the Far Westerners could grasp what they'd seen, the sea monster flagship gave a violent shudder. The cuttlefish had hit their mark.

The monster's outer shell, hard as iron, was not impenetrable after all. The great ship listed heavily to the side. The soldier responsible for the signal lamp tumbled from his perch on the mainmast to an unknown fate below the waves before he could utter a sound, and the enemy army's clean formation broke apart into chaos. Gu Yun would never give them time to breathe—every hawk aboard Great Liang's flagship rose into the air and streaked after the fleeing dragon warships almost faster than the eye could see.

The tense naval battle stretched through the night until the sky paled to a fish-belly white in the east. The Far Westerners hadn't burned through their rich reservoir of supplies, but their formation was shattered. The pope had gotten a bitter taste of Gu Yun's cunning on the field, and even if he choked down blood in frustration, he could do nothing but order a temporary retreat and await his next opportunity.

Gu Yun heaved a sigh of relief. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. "Make a token effort to pursue, but don't draw out the encounter."

If the Far Westerners had retreated even a moment later, a good number of Great Liang's dragonets would have burned through their violet gold and been unable to return to the shore and refuel. At that point, even Gu Yun would have found himself on the defensive. Mister Ja had been right. The new Great Liang navy still lacked the ability to fight on the high seas.

“The enemy commander is getting on in years. He is a meticulous man and difficult to fool. But he’s cautious, too. If we’d faced a brute like our Black Iron Battalion’s He Ronghui on the battlefield, even if we blew his flagship to smithereens, he would have commandeered a little skiff to fight to the last. We would have been in real trouble then.” Gu Yun absentmindedly rubbed his eyes, voice low. His vision was blurring again. He hadn’t noticed earlier, tense as he was, and only now recalled it was time for his medicine. He gave the still shellshocked Yao Zhen a smile and called out: “All ships return to port!”

But even after returning to the commander’s tent, Gu Yun didn’t rest. He had an emergency military dispatch to pen to the court, and he needed to requisition supplies so they wouldn’t be caught off balance again. After calling someone to brew him a bowl of medicine and drinking it down, he ground his ink and considered how to counter the Far Western army in the coming days as he waited for it to take effect.

A spike of pain shot from a newly acquired bruise on his back up to the crown of his head. Gu Yun’s hand faltered, and the inkstick slipped from his fingers. He clenched his teeth and pressed his palms into the table, waiting for the wave of pain to pass. But this time, the torment was severe, lasting nearly an hour before it gradually began to dull. Gu Yun’s back was soaked in cold sweat.

It was then that he discovered a critical issue.

His vision and hearing, which should have been clearing up again by now, had not recovered in the least.

Chapter 119:
Longing

GU YUN'S HEART sank as he looked down at the blurry medicine bowl in front of him in dazed realization. He didn't panic. He'd known this day was coming. But, like many things, knowledge made it no easier to accept—every person knew they would die one day, yet when it came time to close their eyes at last, who wouldn't be reluctant to go?

Their formidable foes had retreated, but the Liangjiang Garrison was still abuzz with activity, and the sirens warning of enemy attack had yet to be silenced, their wails piercing the air. But in Gu Yun's ears, that sound was no more than a distant sigh.

His world was blurred and quiet, the black ink and white paper on the table no more than two fuzzy patches of color.

Gu Yun sat unmoving by the table for a quarter hour, unconsciously tightening his fingers around the string of beads the late emperor had left him. It was strange—Gu Yun had spent most of his life on the borders or running all across the nation, accumulating bumps and scratches in every corner of the land. The string connecting these beads had broken on numerous occasions, but he had recovered them every time without exception. By now, he had changed the string thrice yet still hadn't lost a single bead. They were still there, cool and covered in a layer of morning mist, resting over the stark bones of his wrist.

As if that man who had both cherished and maimed him had been watching over him all this time.

It was the sensation of those wooden beads digging into his skin that snapped Gu Yun out of his trance. He said nothing about the failure of his medicine, but pulled out the glass monocle he used in emergencies and placed it on the bridge of his nose. A flick of his finger shattered the bowl into pieces; he gathered the shards together and swept them into a corner of the room. Sitting back down, he wrote the dispatch and a requisition for supplies, then summoned a messenger to deliver them.

Yao Zhen came in on the messenger's heels. Seeing the monocle perched on Gu Yun's nose, he asked, "Marshal, have you not yet taken your medicine?"

Gu Yun had gotten quite adept at lipreading and replied as if nothing was amiss. "I accidentally dropped the bowl—forget it, there's no need to brew another dose, it's not urgent. I could send these hairy foreigners packing even if I went blind tomorrow."

Yao Zhen looked at the pile of shards in the corner, an ominous cloud rising at the back of his mind. But finding nothing to justify his worry, he merely said, "After this battle, things may change again in the capital."

Gu Yun hummed in acknowledgment. "Chongze-xiong, could I trouble you to send an urgent missive to the northern border? Summon Shen Jiping here. I need to adjust military deployments on all four borders. And Chen…"

He stopped. Yao Zhen asked, confused, "Who?"

“Nobody.” Gu Yun shook his head. “Go on.”

The cure for Chang Geng’s wu’ergu still depended on Chen Qingxu. He couldn’t afford to divert her attention now.

The emergency military dispatch reached the capital that evening. Li Feng sent someone to drag Chang Geng back from the National Temple overnight, and the Warm Pavilion was once again crowded with the high-ranking officials of the court.

Chang Geng’s eyelid wouldn’t stop twitching—a sharp sense of foreboding had pricked him all the way to the palace. He stirred restlessly. When someone handed him the report from the front lines, he held his breath and read the brief report over seven or eight times, confirming that it was indeed written in Gu Yun’s own clean hand, the strokes of each character neat and powerful. When he had penned this report, at least, he had been well. Only then did Chang Geng let out a long-held breath. He gathered himself, closed his eyes for a moment, and thought, *I nearly gave myself a fright.*

The turbid stream of his thoughts cleared. This battle was good news for him. If the war became critical again, Fang Qin would stand no chance of disbanding the Grand Council. Forget Li Feng—the garrisons on Great Liang’s borders would never allow it. Chang Geng would have much more room to maneuver.

Their enemy had presented him with exactly the opening he needed.

Fang Qin, on the other hand, was distressed in the extreme. He had tossed and turned through countless sleepless nights over the past six months, pouring his blood, sweat, and tears into rallying the high-ranking officials from noble families who had previously been as scattered as a pile of sand. He had planned for every contingency and finally begun to see the first stages of victory. The cries for the dissolution of the Grand Council had grown louder and louder. Prince Yan had found himself hard-pressed to keep his head above water as his right-hand men were embroiled in a wave of scandals of their own. Fang Qin only needed to give them a final push—yet the Far Westerners had chosen this exact moment to cause trouble.

Had Great Liang initiated the hostilities, he could have criticized the Marquis of Order for wasting the energies of their army on reckless warfare. But according to the report, it was their enemy who had launched a sneak attack during the night.

“Disband the Grand Council.” Li Feng took a stack of memorials from a palace attendant. “Reduce military spending, investigate corrupt civilian merchants encroaching on land without authorization…”

The Warm Pavilion was utterly silent.

Li Feng cast the stack of memorials to the ground. “The Far Westerners haven’t even fully retreated from our borders. Look at all of you, so eager to yank firewood from under the cauldron for our enemy’s benefit!”

Fang Qin gritted his teeth and swallowed his prepared speech. He had thought to speak first and control the flow of the conversation, but Li Feng had beaten him to the punch.

At this point, the first person who was tactless enough to speak might quickly find themselves charged with treason.

Li Feng's gaze fell on Chang Geng. "As for you. Do you think yourself the victim in all of this? Our ministers say a few words against you, and you abandon your post, running home in a huff. How many times is this now? You're a grown man—have you no other tricks? The Grand Council is empty from dawn till dusk, and the only people still working are a couple of sweepers at the gate. Li Min, I'll say it now: get your ass back to the Grand Council first thing tomorrow, or don't come back at all!"

The core members of the Grand Council fell to their knees alongside Prince Yan in apology.

Li Feng didn't ask them to rise. He turned to the newly appointed Chief Justice of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review. "Jiang Hanshi came from the Imperial Court of Judicial Review—your former superior. Do you really find it so difficult to investigate one old case against him? Or are you planning to drag it out until the new year?"

With the emperor's ire suddenly turned on him, the Chief Justice didn't dare say a word as he knelt along with his neighbors in the Grand Council.

Li Feng picked out each high-ranking official in turn and reprimanded them until everyone was beaten and bloody. Fang Qin was one of the few who'd kept his nose clean, and the emperor let him off with a few words of caution—compared to Prince Yan, who hadn't been allowed to rise since his knees hit the floor, Li Feng was practically genial and had merely one point of critique: "Dear Minister Fang, the Far Western army has come with sinister intent. We cannot allow ourselves to be disadvantaged over matters of logistics. You oversee the Ministry of Revenue. Redouble your efforts."

Fang Qin had no choice but to lower his head and agree. He felt as if he'd had a basin of cold water dumped over his head—after this evening, everything he'd worked toward for so long stood to be wiped out in a single stroke.

The neglected office of the Grand Council bustled once again, aglow with lamplight through the night.

Upon his return, Prince Yan's first act was to give a bracing speech: "The situation on the borders is pressing. I urge everyone to put matters of national security first. Sometimes, we must suffer indignities to serve our nation. Even the most unassailable coalition will one day splinter. Mark my words: in the end, we will get the reward we deserve. As for Hanshi-xiong, you needn't worry. Now that His Majesty has spoken, he will surely return unscathed in a matter of days."

Everyone watched him in silence.

"Our games with the war beacon tickets are over," he continued. "Let's consider what we can do with the Longan Bank. Recall the three things I told you we must rip from our noble adversaries' hands: the silver in their wallets, the land beneath their feet, and the respect of the world's scholars. We have a solid grasp on the first, while the second is a strike at their very foundations, and will certainly invite retribution. If we can stand our ground, the third—as well as all that follows—will flow like water into a ready channel."

Someone raised their voice. "Your Highness, shall we continue our investigation into corruption among imperial merchants and illicit collusion between merchants and officials?"

“The war, the national economy, and the livelihoods of the common folk are our priority. But if any miscreant insists on blocking our way, we needn’t hold back. Do well the tasks you have been assigned, and as for everything else…even if the sky should fall, I will hold it up for you.” Chang Geng turned away with a flick of his sleeves. “Get to work. Present me with a plan tomorrow.”

His words struck with the solidity of a promise. The Grand Council, the Lingshu Institute, the Canal Commission, the major merchants with their deep coffers, the upstart faction that had overrun half the court—all began to revolve around the heavenly body at their center in a perfectly choreographed dance, each attending to their own duties.

Five days later, the Imperial Court of Judicial Review reached a verdict in Jiang Chong’s case, and he returned to his original post. The Liangjiang Garrison put out an official call to arms declaring their intent to wage war against foreign invaders and recover ancestral land. Gu Yun fought three skirmishes against the Far Western navy in five days, not giving a centimeter. At the same time, he dispatched orders to adjust the structure of the military garrisons on all borders. He bestowed seven golden arrow tokens of command within a day, all of which needed to be filed with the Grand Council. The Grand Council’s errand runners became runners in truth, kicking up clouds of dust beneath their soles as they rushed to and fro.

Chang Geng sprawled out on his desk as the night watchmen struck the fourth watch[2] and took a brief nap. His sleep was restless—thanks to the influence of the wu’ergu, it was a miracle for him to have a relatively clear nightmare; most of what he got were dark and jumbled impressions. At times like this, even the sound of someone flipping the pages of a book next door could startle him awake.

The wu’ergu was wicked as the evil god whence it took its name. Most often he would wake tense with agitation and malice. But today, when Chang Geng started awake at the sound of footfalls outside his door and lifted his head from where it had been pillowed on his arms, his heart pounded in confused disorder. He felt none of the usual irritation he had on waking, but rather a deep sense of sorrow and disquiet. When he looked down, he found his sleeve was stained with tears.

A voice from the doorway: “Your Highness, a missive from Jiangnan.”

Chang Geng sucked in a discreet breath. “Bring it here.”

It was news of another major operation from Gu Yun—he planned to send reinforcements to the southwest. He stated no reason, but laid out a meticulous report listing the location of the garrison, the commander, details of coordination between various military branches, and routes for the transport of rations. Chang Geng swiftly read through the whole thing. He wasn’t deeply versed in military strategy and didn’t manage to take any deeper meaning from the plans, so he merely processed the report and set it aside to be filed.

Only then did he discover a personal letter from Gu Yun lying beneath the official correspondence.

Perhaps *letter* was not quite accurate—it was a single strip of paper with a few brief words, bracketed with neither salutation nor signature:

Our separation has been too long; I miss you dearly.

Gu Yun's letters were sometimes romantic, sometimes licentious, sometimes openly flirtatious and at others slyly playful. But he rarely said things like *I miss you* in full sincerity. Chang Geng started in surprise, his fatigue evaporating in an instant. He felt as if those inked words had become an arrow that punched through his chest without warning.

He wished he could take back every last grandiloquent, ambitious word he had spoken—*what Grand Council?*—toss them all aside, forget everything, and run off to see Gu Yun that very instant.

Chang Geng squeezed that strip of paper in his hand, then painstakingly rolled it up and stored it away in his ever-present sachet, trying to calm himself. He carefully read through the set of rules and regulations for the Longan Bank that the Grand Council had drafted, but despite the lines of neat handwriting marching across the page before his eyes, not a single character reached his brain. Within the time it took an incense stick to fall to ash, he found himself unable to sit still.

He snatched up his cloak and delivered an order: "Prepare my horse!"

Seeing the prince in such a rush, everyone thought he rode out on the most urgent business. They hurried to saddle his steed and back out of the way, watching him race off in a cloud of dust.

Chang Geng rode for the National Temple at a gallop. The mountain temple was quiet at this early hour, its doors pulled shut to wait for dawn. Fallen leaves danced in the autumn wind, and the entrance was lit only by a single lamp standing solemnly at the gate, its flame flickering in the night. Even here, the air was redolent with the sedate scent of sandalwood incense.

Liao Ran had long gone to bed. When Chang Geng charged inside, he kicked up a breeze that sent the sutras on the table fluttering around the room. Liao Ran jerked awake, staring in naked shock as Prince Yan swept in, cloaked in chilly wind.

Chang Geng's eyes were faintly red. He sank down into a seat and croaked, "Tea—do you have any?"

Draping his monk's robes over his shoulders, Liao Ran grabbed a handful of kuding tea leaves from his shabby wooden drawers, and put some water on to boil. Although the room was drafty and the cups were chipped, the monk was calm and steady in his movements as he heated the water and brewed the tea in perfect silence. He kept his eyes on his task as steam rose in snowy-white tendrils, calling to mind the rumble and hiss of engines and armor. It condensed on the low ceiling, sliding to the ends of the specially shaped rafters to drip into hanging earthen bowls with bright plinks.

Chang Geng's eyes followed the cycle from steam to water drop, starting from the weathered ceramic pot and ending in the ring of little bowls with peeling paint nestled in the corners of the monastic cell's ceiling. He breathed a soft sigh, his heart gradually smoothing its roiling agitation.

Liao Ran steeped a cup of kuding in boiling water and placed it in front of Chang Geng. Even the scent was bitter.

"Thank you." Chang Geng accepted the cup. Feeling had begun to return to his fingers, icy cold after his ride through the night wind. When he took a sip, the tea was scalding hot, numbing the tip of his tongue. He looked at Liao Ran and grimaced. "I've been too busy these past few days and have been agitated; I failed to properly suppress the wu'ergu. I apologize for making a spectacle of myself,

Great Master."

Liao Ran finally met his eyes. "The Far Westerners are adept at finding chinks in our defenses," he signed, "yet this time, they chose their moment poorly. Although they appear mighty, they are in truth at the end of their rope. Marshal Gu is more than capable of commanding all four borders, to say nothing of the Liangjiang theater. Once the railway is completed, people and supplies can travel freely back and forth between Jiangbei and the capital in the space of a day. Given our current stores of violet gold, with any luck, we'll recover all our lost territory within a year or two. Your Highness, what need is there to worry?"

His words made perfect sense, but for some reason Chang Geng still felt uneasy.

"Xiao-Cao is with Master Du, is he not?" Chang Geng said quietly. "They're not far from Liangjiang. Perhaps he can check on him in my stead. I'll write a letter and ask Xiao-Cao to take a post in the military. His talent lies in the art of disguise, but Master Du doesn't have much use for him beyond running errands. He may as well go to the front lines."

Liao Ran nodded. "Your Highness doesn't wish Marshal Gu to return to the capital. Is this not perfect timing?"

Gu Yun was Prince Yan's weakness, but this weakness had never been threatened in any real sense. With war looming, no one could touch Gu Yun—Li Feng's abilities as a ruler may have been mediocre, but he wasn't so foolish as to tear down his own defenses a second time.

For Gu Yun, the constant bloodshed and danger of the battlefield was its own form of protection.

Chang Geng frowned. He finished his cup of kuding, then muttered, "Everyone depends on him, but who worries over his illnesses and injuries? When I think about it, sometimes I really…"

At this point, his eyes collided with the mute monk's pity-filled gaze. Chang Geng stopped and lowered his head with a soft chuckle. "I said too much again. I ought to up my dosage of pacifying fragrance."

Liao Ran could see he only wanted to calm himself, so he let the topic go. He took his wooden fish from beneath the table, lowered his lashes, and struck it in a lazy beat. The tap of the wooden fish and plinks of dripping water were the only sounds in the small cell. Amid this rhythmic backdrop, Chang Geng sat on the low couch and rested his eyes, only saying his goodbyes when the sky began to brighten.

As he rose to leave, Liao Ran rapped on the table, drawing Chang Geng's attention. He signed to Chang Geng, "Your Highness, this humble monk was honored by the opportunity to listen in on your meeting with Master Du, but there was one thing I could not understand."

Chang Geng's exhaustion-bruised eyes flickered as he raised a brow.

"Your Highness, you said all the profits in the world add up to the size of a meat pie. Everyone wants the largest slice, and there is nothing inherently good or evil about this desire. But some wish to follow the flow of progress, to expand the total size of the pie and thereby increase their own share. These people may lay the foundations of a prosperous nation and peace for the people. Others, however, wish to stand against the flow of progress. Their own portion is already moldering, yet

they want to hoard even more to molder along with it. These people attract naught but disaster. Nowadays, over half the pie has fallen into the hands of the old noble families. If we wish to overturn the status quo and scrape away the mold on our nation bit by bit—"

"Great Master," Chang Geng asked. "Is there anything wrong with what I said?"

"There isn't." Liao Ran shook his head, wide sleeves rustling with the motions of his hands. "But this humble monk was thinking—all the nation's land belongs to the sovereign. The Marching Orders Decree and Gold-Consolidation Decree are ready evidence of this. Everything Your Highness has so arduously worked for may be wiped out by the single stroke of a pen in the future, and all your efforts rendered as insubstantial as a flower in the mirror or the moon in water."

Chang Geng tapped his finger lightly on the table, his face absent any ripple of emotion. Evidently, Liao Ran's concerns were something he had also considered. "The great master is correct." He lowered his handsome eyes and laughed lightly. His sharp profile was that of a wicked god staring menacingly out from some totem.

Liao Ran's heart thudded in his chest, and his mouth briefly went dry. He suddenly wondered—Prince Yan seemed to be fighting with the old noble families over the prize of imperial favor. But was that really his true intent?

Chapter 120:
Hope

CAO CHUNHUA DIDN'T TARRY after receiving the Linyuan wooden bird. He handed over what tasks he was responsible for and set off at once for the Liangjiang Garrison.

As he neared his destination, he caught the faint scent of gunpowder. A frightful aura seemed to loom out of the humid, chilly air. He subconsciously straightened his spine and left off humming and winking at the random passersby he saw along the way, stiffening himself into the shape of a respectable young man. The garrison was under heavy guard, and not a single sentry could be spotted whispering to a companion. It was utterly silent save for the battle cries rising from where ranks of soldiers were drilling in formation not far away.

Cao Chunhua rubbed his eyes. For a moment he thought he'd walked into the camp of the Black Iron Battalion.

A guard blocked his approach. Cao Chunhua knew better than to joke around in Gu Yun's camps; he wasted no time producing the documents of passage sent to him by the Grand Council. The average age of this row of guards couldn't have been more than eighteen, but after verifying his papers, they neither attempted to flatter him nor committed any breach of etiquette. One guard stepped out of the ranks to lead him to the commander's tent. By the time Cao Chunhua turned back, he saw that the remainder had seamlessly closed the one-man gap in the line.

His guide was shy at first, but his tongue loosened once he heard Cao Chunhua had fought against the northern barbarians with Gu Yun. "The Far Westerners won't find us easy pickings with the marshal here," he boasted. "They can't win a head-to-head battle, so they've been circling Liangjiang's harbors launching guerilla attacks. My captain says they may try to turn this into a war of attrition. Sir, everyone says our Great Liang is vast in territory and rich in resources. Are the Far Westerners so rich too?"

"Don't call me sir; I'm just an errand runner." Cao Chunhua waved a hand, then continued, "I don't understand these things either, but I've heard Master Du speak of it. Look at those battleships of theirs. They're specially designed for long ocean voyages and naval battles. Remember how they blasted open Jiangnan Harbor and Dagu Harbor a few years ago? If they bested even *our* navy so easily, think of all those tiny nations scattered like marbles across the sea. Once they conquer a place, they devour it, rob it of its resources, erect factories they couldn't operate in their own nation, and force the captive populace to work for them, draining them of fat and blood—with enough time, of course they'd become rich."

His guide was silent the rest of the way to Gu Yun's tent. As they waited for Gu Yun's personal guard to go inside and report Cao Chunhua's arrival, the young soldier spoke up again. "Sir, I've heard the old veterans talk about the Jiangnan Navy before the war. They said back when General Zhao was in charge, salaries were high and there was little work to do, and their training was lax compared to other regional garrisons. When they weren't on duty, they could go ashore and wander amid the apricot blossoms and misty rain. I used to think I'd been born at the wrong time. If I'd enlisted in peacetime, maybe I could have lazed my way into

becoming a respected serviceman too."

Cao Chunhua glanced back at him. Abashed, the young guard flashed him a small smile. "After talking to you today, I finally see how short-sighted that was. After all, the man who can pick up a blade and fight is more fortunate than the animal herded about by others."

"Young Master Cao." The guard on duty at the commander's tent had reemerged. "The marshal invites you inside."

Cao Chunhua blinked and stepped inside the commander's tent. The first thing he noticed was the glaringly gaudy glass monocle Gu Yun had fixed on the bridge of his nose. The intricate filigree radiating from the lens threatened to overwhelm its wearer, and the frame arched up from the bridge of his nose all the way to his temple, covering practically half his face. It was less a monocle than a mask.

Cao Chunhua stared. *What happened to the marshal's eyes?*

But everyone in the tent was talking business, and Cao Chunhua dared not interrupt.

Shen Yi and Yao Zhen were both present, the latter reading out a letter from the Far Westerners. "The hairy foreigners say they approach in good faith with intentions of peace and fellowship to propose that four commanderies of Jiangnan be ceded as an international zone, independently governed by their own local garrison to protect the interests of Western merchants. In the future, this place may become an important link between our nations for maritime trade… Oh, they also say they deeply love this land and do not wish to see good, fertile soil laid waste by war."

Shen Yi frowned. "Yesterday it was three commanderies. Why are they asking for a fourth today?"

Yao Zhen looked at him in helpless exasperation. "Perhaps because of how deeply they love it?"

"They can fuck right off." The whorls of the gaudy monocle Gu Yun wore were elegant, yet the words he spoke were anything but. "What the hell are they doing falling in love with our land? As if they have any right to it."

Shen Yi was silent. There wasn't much he could say to that.

A giggle escaped Cao Chunhua at the door.

Looking up, Shen Yi hurriedly waved him over. "Xiao-Cao is here! Heaven knows how long we've been waiting for you. Come, tell me when that iron earthworm of ours will be ready."

"Ay, Shen-xiansheng, do you have to call it that… Soon," Cao Chunhua replied. "We have no shortage of manpower. The northern tracks are basically laid, and the south will be easier since we won't need to pause construction in the winter. Once all the sections are connected, the steam locomotive can run from the capital straight to the shores of the Yangtze. Master Du says that if all goes smoothly, we could complete it by the end of the year—ah, Marshal, why the monocle today?"

"Nice, isn't it?" Gu Yun grinned shamelessly, the corners of his peach blossom eyes curving sharply upward as if about to take flight. "I broke one the other day, so I commissioned a famous artisan from Yangzhou Prefecture to make this new one. I can't bear to keep such a beautiful thing hidden away, so I thought, why not put it out on display daily for everyone to see?"

Shen Yi looked like he had a stomachache. "Aiyo, my dear marshal, you had better keep it hidden. The eyes of us mortals are undeserving of such beauty."

Gu Yun ignored him. He tilted his face to give Cao Chunhua a good look from all angles, running his mouth all the while. "If all else fails, I'll personally take to the battlefield and seduce them. I may not be able to fell a million mighty troops, but twenty or thirty thousand should be no problem. Isn't that right, Xiao-Cao?"

Cao Chunhua's face went red with a *fwoom*. Shen Yi and Yao Zhen could hardly bear to watch; both turned their faces away.

"Your timing is impeccable." Gu Yun leapt to his feet and slung an arm around the scarlet-faced Cao Chunhua's shoulder, steering him over to the sand table. "I've got a job for you—no one else will do. There's an errand I need you to run for me."

Whether Gu Yun's innovative new seduction tactics would be effective against the Far Westerners remained unknown, but they were certainly effective against Cao Chunhua. His face went a deep shade of crimson and sweat prickled on the back of his neck. Gu Yun could have asked anything of him at that moment, and he would have readily agreed.

Cao Chunhua stumbled out of the commander's tent in a daze. As the cool air hit him, he started in shock—*Wait*. Hadn't Prince Yan sent him south to keep an eye on Marshal Gu? How had he gotten conned into haring off to the southwestern border within an hour of his arrival? Gu Yun had even taken pains to instruct him that this mission was a deadly secret, and that he must let his orders rot in his belly the instant he left the commander's tent. Not even the Grand Council was to know… What was he supposed to tell Prince Yan?!

Shen Yi personally showed the dejected Cao Chunhua to his lodgings before returning to Gu Yun. Yao Zhen had gone, and the lights in the commander's tent were dim. Shen Yi found Gu Yun with his long legs propped up on a nearby bench, arms crossed over his chest, deep in contemplation about who knew what. Ever since he had lost his hearing, he was no longer vexed by the flood of observations gleaned through his exceptional powers of perception. He found it very easy to focus on his own thoughts.

The breeze of the opening tent flap alerted Gu Yun, and he looked up at Shen Yi. “Have you finished?”

Shen Yi nodded. “Do you really intend to use Xiao-Cao, or are you just afraid he’ll tattle on you to His Highness Prince Yan?”

“Am I the sort who’d use official pretenses for personal affairs?” Gu Yun arched a brow. Before Shen Yi could apologize and express remorse, he continued. “It’s both.”

Shen Yi had no words. Was this what he considered separating business and personal affairs?

“Now that fighting has broken out here in the south, there will be changes in the court. And Chang Geng shouldn’t be overexerting himself in his condition, so there’s really not much else we can do. I’ve only had a little mishap; I don’t want to distract him from his work. In any case, I really do need someone both sharp and trustworthy to take on the mission I’ve given Xiao-Cao,” Gu Yun said. “That old geezer we’re facing thinks he’s so impressive, fighting his way here all across the sea. I think it’s time I show him the difference between a general and a marshal.”

Shen Yi was of two minds: on the one hand, as a veteran of the Black Iron Battalion, he would willingly lay down his life for his marshal. On the other, Gu Yun’s shameless boasting gave him gooseflesh—he was once again at a loss for words. He was left to plead with him: “Zixi, even if you’re going blind, can’t you wear a more normal monocle?”

Gu Yun donned his armor and readied his gear to go on patrol—their commander personally patrolling every day like he was a recruit showing up for roll call was another specialty of the Liangjiang Garrison—though he could hardly see a few meters in front of his face.

“I won’t,” he said, all earnestness. “I want to follow the example of the Prince of Lanling,[3] renowned for his beauty as well as his military prowess.”

Shen Yi was beginning to suspect this bastard hadn’t summoned him from the northwest to share his worries at all. He was just messing with him!

After arriving in Jiangnan, Cao Chunhua had time to write only one letter to Chang Geng. He conveyed that Marshal Gu filled his days with military affairs and bullying Shen-xiansheng, and that he otherwise seemed in good health. Whether Gu Yun had sent him off on a job, or whether he was simply so overjoyed to be in the marshal’s presence that he forgot his duties entirely, this was the last Chang Geng heard from him. Recalling Cao Chunhua’s terminal puppy crush on Gu Yun, Chang Geng felt a twinge of envy, but at the same time, he was assured—no news was good news. If Cao Chunhua could afford to dally all day in an infatuated daze, Gu Yun was probably handling the situation with the ease Liao Ran suggested.

At the same time, Chen Qingxu reached the capital, arriving just before the date of the Double Ninth Festival.

Chang Geng broke his month-long streak of camping out in the Grand Council and took a rare half-day off to receive her.

When he had first read in Gu Yun’s letter that they had found a record of the goddess’s secret techniques with Jialai Yinghuo, Chang Geng had indeed been fretful with anticipation, like an old fey spirit who had spent a lifetime hiding itself

among ordinary mortals finally hearing it could become one of them. But after his return to the capital, his attention had been consumed by drawing up plans and spinning schemes at lightning speed while dodging a hail of attacks from his political enemies. He really had no time to worry about anything else, and his nervousness only returned now that he was about to meet Chen Qingxu in person.

Chen Qingxu was never one to revel in suspense. The second she saw Chang Geng, she skipped the formalities and delivered her opening salvo: “It can be cured.”

Those few words were enough to freeze Chang Geng in place for more than a moment, until, lightheaded, he finally let out his held breath. “A chronic ailment that rooted itself in my blood shortly after I left my mother’s belly can still be cured?”

Chen Qingxu nodded. “It can.”

Hidden in the sleeves of his court robes, Chang Geng’s hands spasmed. But his voice was steady as ever. “They say the creation of the wicked god involves merging the flesh and blood of two people into one. If I have been two people all my life, then how… Miss Chen, how can you split them apart?”

A rare smile touched the edges of Chen Qingxu’s mouth. “It will take some time, and I’m afraid you will suffer somewhat in the process.”

Chang Geng’s heart was in his throat. “Then, Zixi…”

“There were relevant writings on the poison among the records of the goddess’s secret techniques. But their system of medicine is different from ours, and there are many points I must verify. I will have to sort through the information before I can say anything definitive.”

Chang Geng drew in a deep breath, his heart racing so fast he felt it might burst through his chest. For a moment, he forgot where and when he was. He wanted to tell Gu Yun that very instant, and turned as if to stride out the door. But he only made it a few steps before he halted and clapped a hand to his forehead. *I’m losing it. I can’t let him know. On the battlefield, blades have no eyes. What if he has an accident because he’s distracted?*

Lacking anyone with whom he could share his good news, His Highness Prince Yan instead did something highly embarrassing. After escorting Miss Chen to her lodgings, he slipped away to the Marquis Estate, holed himself up in Gu Yun’s room, and secretly penned a letter. He didn’t send it, but rather waited for it to dry and slid it beneath Gu Yun’s pillow. Still not satisfied, he pulled out his secret collection of all the letters Gu Yun had ever written him. He lay on the bed mentally running through every sort of thing Gu Yun might say, then pieced together an imagined reply from Gu Yun, spending the evening amusing himself in a lively one-man show.

For the next week, Chang Geng’s world was bright—even the sight of Fang Qin, when Chang Geng happened upon him during the day, was more pleasing to his eyes.

Fang Qin, on the other hand, was having a rather miserable time.

These days, the reports on Li Feng’s desk impeaching Prince Yan had piled into a stack half a meter high. To anyone who read them, it would seem Prince Yan

couldn't do a single thing right. If he so much as coughed while walking along the road, someone would say the hunch of his shoulders was evidence of deceitful acts against his sovereign. In contrast, the young upstarts under the Grand Council seemed to shrink back, abandoning their former habit of fighting each accusation. Whether they were too busy with work or simply lying low, Fang Qin couldn't guess.

Li Feng's official opinion was that he had none, especially in response to the buffoons who tried to exploit their seniority by bringing up the late emperor or even Emperor Wu.

In fact, the one who was most anxious about the situation wasn't the Grand Council, which was already treading on thin ice, but Fang Qin himself. He strongly opposed ganging up on them like this.

"His Majesty's heart is as clear as a mirror," he had cautioned. "Everyone, aren't you afraid of losing imperial favor by slinging accusations at a time like this?"

"Minister Fang," someone had replied. "All you speak of is imperial favor. Aren't you thinking too small? The late emperor came up as an unremarkable son of a commandery prince from a collateral branch of the Li family. How do you think he became the master of the imperial palace so easily? My family swept aside the opposition and led the charge to support his right to ascend. How much have we contributed to the success of his reign? The iron certificate with cinnabar writing awarded for our service is displayed in a place of honor in my home to this day. Now that his sons and grandsons have a stable claim on the nation, do they intend to cast aside those who've helped raise them to their seat on the throne?"

Another person said, "If he really pushes us, we could bring out the late emperor's memorial tablet. Would the Son of Heaven really risk committing a dreadful taboo and ignore the laws established by his forefathers?"

Fang Qin sucked in a harsh breath. "My lords, please mind your words!" he snapped.

He was a respected minister; everyone fell silent, although from their expressions, it was clear they weren't happy about it.

Every noble of Great Liang, regardless of the prestige of the official titles held by their family heads, could drown a person in the pages of their genealogies. Most were bound by marriage to plenty of other influential clans, and became inextricably mixed up in power struggles within the imperial household generation after generation. Nearly all the families that flourished today had been fortunate enough to back the right horse in every generation. As time went on, perhaps it was no surprise that they developed the misconception that all the emperors over the years had been propped up by their family's hands alone.

Ordinarily, they listened when Fang Qin spoke because they respected the Fang family. But when things got heated, as they now did, the Fang family's unspoken hegemony over the noble families wasn't enough to squash dissent—they were all relatives, after all, and no one more noble than anyone else. Why should the Fang family have the final word in matters pertaining to the heads sitting atop their necks and the silver filling their coffers?

Fang Qin was left to appeal to reason and sentiment. "His Majesty has grandiose ambitions, and can least tolerate challenges to his imperial power. The

Far Westerners' new incursion will inevitably remind him of the capital siege. If he had any hesitation before, it will have gone—by now he has steeled himself to fight this war to the bitter end. Now is not the time to court trouble and risk accusations of bringing disaster upon the nation. Please, my noble companions, put yourselves in his place and *think*!"

He sighed and softened his tone. "If we can endure just a little longer, until the end of the war, the Grand Council will inevitably be reformed or disbanded. We can already guess its members will resist, and will certainly make some move. At that point, can His Majesty fail to see how they've overreached? Everyone need only look at the Marching Orders Decree and Gold-Consolidation Decree to see what His Majesty truly desires. He is humoring these lowly civilian merchants out of convenience. When they are no longer useful, will His Majesty continue to favor them? After the war, even Gu Yun will likely be forced to hand over his Black Iron Tiger Tally. The Grand Council will never maintain their monopoly on power."

Fang Qin believed he'd given an earnest and careful analysis of the situation.

But not all of these noble sons were the type to look toward the future—the man who had bragged about his family's iron certificate spoke up again. "Minister Fang, you have a host of logical arguments on your side, but you are overly idealistic. After the war is over? When, dare I ask, will that be? A year or two? A decade or more? Are we to swallow our pride until our bodies are buried beneath the yellow dirt?"

Fang Qin disdained this rabble—too many of them were leeches on the nation without a single accomplishment to their name, yet they went about their days with their noses in the air. They deserved to be caught out for their crimes. But he couldn't express his disgust. Pursuit of mutual profit had been the key to bringing these people together, and without the promise of more, no one would listen to him even if he spent every day expounding on the virtues of working for the good of the nation and its people.

"Let's calm ourselves," Fang Qin said. "If we were to fight for a decade, the nation would be drained of every drop of blood. Forget our objections; the emperor himself would never agree to it. It won't be that long. The bottom line is this: Prince Yan is a prince of the first rank. Nothing short of outright rebellion will bring him down. But the roots of our clans also run deep. As long as His Majesty sits atop the throne, as long as we do not fall into disorder ourselves—who can shake our solid foundations?"

Saying it this way was a much prettier way to say it than *If you don't seek your death, no one will send you to it*, though both meant the same thing. It was perfectly constructed to scratch those nobles' itch for flattery. No wonder Fang Qin had made himself the leader of Great Liang's noble families—after decades of holding his own among these people, he was an experienced veteran.

Thanks to his efforts, conflict in the court reached a lull. Both sides called a temporary truce, and all their battles retreated under the table. This brief period of peace in Great Liang's domestic affairs lasted several months.

Three, to be exact—

After which a certain incident put all of Fang Qin's painstaking efforts to waste.

Chapter 121:
Dancing Shadows

ON THE EIGHTH DAY of the twelfth month, Gu Yun sent a secret envoy to visit Dongying and the islands of the South Sea. By then, the south had been an active war zone for over three months. The existing front line expanded under the constant back-and-forth, and the fires of war first spread north along the coast to the plains of Jianghuai between the Yangtze and Huai Rivers, then all the way south through the thirteen counties of Jiangnan to lick at the edges of the Liangguang region.

Local residents who had refused to cross the Yangtze and instead stayed to defend their besieged ancestral lands began to organize their own militias. The displaced civilian artificers, having no access to violet gold, retrofitted their engines to run on coal and crude explosives and fielded an army of inelegant but creative armor. In support of this endeavor, the Lingshu Institute established local branches across the nation to teach and discuss any technologies that weren't deemed confidential military secrets.

Another profound effect of the war also began to surface.

For all Fang Qin's calculations, he had never anticipated that the first to break the uneasy peace in the court wouldn't be Prince Yan's faction, but the purists of the Imperial Censorate and the Department of Supervision. This was the year of Great Liang's triennial provincial imperial examination, yet the war had disrupted its normal proceedings. After a series of unfortunate delays, the so-called osmanthus roll of successful candidates, ordinarily released in the ninth month when the osmanthus was in bloom, was finally released in the bitterly cold twelfth month. By then, the osmanthus was long withered; the results were dubbed the "plum blossom roll," or as the scholars joked, the "glum blossom roll."

Not three days after the results were released, a county-level scholar in Shaanxi Prefecture committed suicide under suspicious circumstances. Fearing a scandal at such a time, regional officials fervently suppressed news of the case and kept it from their superiors. Yet several days later, their efforts were upended when a man blocked the doorway of the Imperial Censorate and made a suit directly to the emperor as the day's grand assembly was being dismissed.

The man's tale was a long one: During Prince Yan's two excursions to Jiangnan, he had chopped countless heads and enacted the strictest new laws to root out the corruption that had plagued the region as far back as the Yuanhe era. In the years of turmoil since, even the residents of the imperial palace had been forced to tighten their belts as official salaries were reduced time and again. At the same time, the introduction of the war beacon tickets, the purchase of which featured in the evaluation system for government officials, came as frost atop snow… The court had essentially turned off the tap and opened the drain. It had been well over a century since Great Liang's officials had experienced such financial hardship.

It was easy to transition from frugality to luxury, but who could bear to be a pauper after enjoying the trappings of wealth? People might preach that even the most ordinary man must do his duty when the nation is in crisis, but no one would hold to the principle when it was their family fortune on the line. Still, they were

stuck. No one dared accept gifts—everyone knew Prince Yan stood behind the wealthy merchants, and any gift accepted in error could be one's undoing. They didn't dare touch military funding either, and after the recent reforms, taxes were also off-limits. As for disaster relief, it didn't bear thinking about—Yang Ronggui and his co-conspirators' heads were still rotting into skulls.

This year's provincial imperial examination presented the perfect opportunity. No one was paying these useless scholars much mind while the entire nation was busy fighting and raising war funds. Certain parties were struck by nefarious inspiration and used the opportunity to line their own pockets with bribes.

But like a radish bringing up a clod of dirt as it was yanked from the earth, this small incident spiraled into a fraud case spanning nine provinces and shocking the entire nation.

After finally managing to corral all the rabble-rousers in his faction, Fang Qin enjoyed only a few weeks of peace before he was buried in a veritable snowbank of memorials from the Imperial Censorate and Department of Supervision.

The purists of these two departments were unlike Prince Yan's faction. Prince Yan's people were pragmatists: every action had an objective. They fought for power in sensible ways, and their actions were often predictable. But these haughty idealists who saw official rank and personal profit as no better than manure under their feet were wont to impeach others for the sake of it—it was their job, after all, and their personal reputations hinged on how many people they successfully deposed.

Young masters from prominent noble clans rarely joined these two regulatory departments, so these oddballs mostly hailed from poor scholarly backgrounds. Corruption in the administration of the imperial examination perfectly coincided with these people's interests. When the news came, it was as if someone had stomped on all their tails at once: the rabid dogs of the two departments who hadn't bitten anyone in a good while exploded in a wild chorus of howls. They excoriated their enemies with new speeches every day and demanded Li Feng launch a serious investigation. Their ferocity suggested that if they weren't satisfied, they would line up to dash their brains out against the coiling dragon pillars of the great hall in protest.

The short-lived peace was shattered in one blow.

With the senior officials of nine provinces implicated in the scandal, it was impossible to guess how many people would be snagged within this complex web before the investigation was complete. Even Fang Qin's useless younger brother became entangled. An old man's sons and grandsons were his reason for living, and Grand Secretary Fang, who had stayed out of the spotlight for years, was inspired to action. Fang Qin could keep up pretenses with just about anyone save for his own father. His skull was fit to split from his headache.

But before Fang Qin could come up with any plan, the emperor skipped the Imperial Court of Judicial Review and the Department of Supervision entirely and shoved the case directly at the Grand Council. What his intentions were with this move, Fang Qin could only guess. Jiang Chong was appointed chief investigator, while the others were to assist him. It seemed the nobles' paper shield would finally burn to ash before the flames of scandal.

Although Fang Qin had been born into brocade and gold, he too had dreams of making a name for himself as an upright minister who would stand the test of

time. He was unwilling to wade into the muck like his peers. For this reason he had first abandoned Lü Chang, who dared try to coerce him, and then abandoned Wang Guo, who was an unadulterated idiot. Now there was nothing else he could abandon —his mother was still sick in her bed in the neighboring courtyard.

Minister Fang had no sooner finished comforting one person than he was explaining the situation to another, and there was still a whole crowd of people lining up outside his door to speak with him. He was in quite the sorry state. After working through the night, two bloody blisters had formed at the corners of his mouth. He had just finished sobbing with his elderly mother when a servant announced yet another caller. Fang Qin kneaded at the space between his brows, a dour look on his face. “Send them away; tell them I’m not at home,” he snapped.

The servant slipped away in fearful silence. One of Fang Qin’s advisors took his place. “Minister, what’s weighing on your mind?” the man asked quietly.

Fang Qin shot him an irritated glance. But he had excellent control of his temper; he wiped the dark look from his face as he replied. “The scholars I know couldn’t kick off a scandal of this magnitude given three years’ time,” he said slowly. “The time between the initial incident and the suit to the emperor in the capital was too short. Someone is helping them behind the scenes… That duplicitous Li Min puts on his pure and virtuous act in the daylight, and only dares to stab people under cover of dark. He’s not fooling anyone aside from His Majesty.”

“Minister, do you have a plan?” the advisor asked.

Fang Qin was utterly vexed. If only he’d had some advance warning—even a single day—he would have some room to maneuver. But the scandal had exploded too quickly; even the emperor had learned of it before he did. Fang Qin found himself in a very awkward position.

He sighed. “It’ll be difficult. Prince Yan is a wolf—once he closes his jaws around his prey’s neck, he won’t let go.”

His advisor chuckled. “Minister, I’ve heard His Highness Prince Yan’s reforms are not yet complete. Over a hundred new points of law are still under debate in court. If you ask me, he’s getting impatient. And this time, he’s been too clever for his own good.”

Fang Qin paused. He could tell the man was trying to keep him in suspense. The Fang Estate employed a healthy number of advisors, but most of them were only there to play weiqi with Grand Secretary Fang and engage him in intellectual debate. They weren’t often granted an opportunity to speak to Fang Qin, so it was unsurprising that they would try to distinguish themselves given the chance.

Stroking his mustache, Fang Qing asked, “What do you mean?”

Seeing his opening, the advisor poured out the speech he had carefully prepared for this moment. “Now that it’s come to this, we likely won’t be able to reverse the verdict in the exams case. In that case, why not attempt something bolder? Let us find a way to destroy Prince Yan’s reforms outright.”

Fang Qin had thought the man had some deep insight to present, but after hearing this, he snuffed out his hopes for a miracle. His voice was cold when he replied. “In every reign of every era, cheating on the imperial examinations has been a severe crime punished with execution or penal service in the army. What does it have to do with government reforms, old or new?”

The advisor smiled, unfazed. “Minister, one person embezzling money is a case of embezzlement, and one person cheating is a case of cheating. But this case involves nine provinces and has dragged countless high-ranking officials into the mud. Is this a coincidence? His Majesty must be wondering too. Why did all these top officials of the court resort to such deplorable acts? There must be a reason—it’s because they’ve struggled to make a living these past few years. They had no choice but to spend from their own pockets to settle the refugees, no choice but to surrender their family fortunes to exorbitant taxation, no choice but to cough up for military expenses, and no choice but to spend whatever it took to meet quotas for war beacon tickets.”

Fang Qin’s eyebrow twitched. “The war beacon tickets in circulation are equivalent to gold or silver. The law is clear on this after the scandal in Jiangbei. What are you trying to say?”

“They are equivalent to gold or silver in circulation, but one can’t pay their taxes with them.” The advisor shook his head, then continued, “Not to mention, many people doing business in Jiangbei are wealthy merchants who fled from the south. They were willing to be early adopters of change. But the Central Plains and the northwest aren’t the same. If they won’t accept the tickets as legal tender, that’s that. If the government tries to force them, they’ll see unruly citizens raising a stink and threatening to hang themselves. And if there should be some incident of this kind, and the court needs to hold someone responsible, who is the one who will be taken to task, the one walking on thin ice? Think about it, Minister. If we put everything we have into one desperate push, we may turn this ship around yet. Even if your brother, the third master, is convicted and loses his official position, as long as the Fang family’s influence remains, you can still return triumphant in the future.”

Fang Qin fell silent.

The advisor’s voice was low now. “Minister, no one can predict the future. We hope to settle old debts after the war is over, but Prince Yan’s side will have guessed our intentions there too. How can we sit on our hands at a time like this? If we don’t make our move, we’ll be pushed into a dead end… Minister, this student has spoken too much today; please take no offense. If you’ll excuse me.”

On the sixteenth of the twelfth month, the Regional Supervisor of Shaanxi Prefecture, one of the ringleaders of the conspiracy, was interrogated. As expected, the man sobbed and wailed in front of the entire court, claiming that the region he governed was too poor, and that he found it difficult to promote the war beacon tickets. With three unreachable quotas set by his superiors staring him in the face, the local government had no choice but to buy up the tickets themselves. However, with no source of tax revenue and only his meager salary to draw on, it was all he could do to move funds back and forth. He’d fallen into a predicament too terrible to describe, which was why he had resorted to such reckless measures. Like a tossed stone that raised a thousand ripples in its wake, the other accused officials told the same story, dragging Prince Yan’s faction, which had heretofore merely watched the flames from the opposite shore, completely underwater. A particularly incensed offender went so far as to argue, “They say cheating on the imperial examinations is the same as buying official posts. Well then, please explain the difference between selling government posts and tying evaluations for government officials to the purchase of war beacon tickets.”

The new year replaced the old amid this chaotic battle of words. No one enjoyed their holiday dumplings in peace.

In the end, the Grand Council had no choice but to submit an official apology, remove the articles involving war beacon tickets in the evaluation of officials in the new government reforms, and pause the sale of war beacon tickets indefinitely.

But the war had once again reached a fever pitch. To avoid running out of money, the Grand Council chose this moment to propose the court halt the distribution of government-minted silver. Taking inspiration from policies the Far Westerners had implemented in their occupied territories as well as paper notes used by a previous dynasty, local branches of the Longan Bank would distribute special "silver substitutes" that would replace coins cast from real gold and silver. In no time, they'd written up a whole system of new laws governing their invention's distribution and use and handed them in along with their official apology.

The Longan Bank represented the authority of the Canal Commission and similarly fell under the jurisdiction of the Grand Council. As long as the new laws proved themselves a feasible solution to the court's money woes, no one would object, whether their final form turned out to be iron notes or paper coin. All agreed behind closed doors, however, that this venture could absolutely not fall under the Grand Council's control.

And so, in a most predictable turn, the Grand Council's steam locomotive project was mysteriously derailed just as it was about to be completed.

Most of the tracks in the north and south had already been laid, leaving only a segment in the middle to complete the undertaking. But the project had been on hold for over a month, thanks not to the funding, but the land.

The majority of the land along the railway's proposed route had been secured ahead of time. But the track covered a vast territory; it had been impossible to ensure every stretch of land it passed through was unowned. In these cases, the Canal Commission came forward to purchase the land originally belonging to private persons at the market rate, while offering them certain other forms of compensation, such as discounting or fully exempting them from taxes. For those unwilling to sell their ancestral plot, the government wrote up a lease contract and agreed to pay an annual fee to lease the land instead of exercising eminent domain.

Since the beginning of the Yuanhe era, Great Liang's rulers had emphasized benevolent governance. The court was strict with its civil and military officials, but lenient with the local gentry. It was precisely this benevolent spirit that allowed a fatal loophole to find its way into the lease agreement: the terms specified an expiration date for the contract but left no provision for what would happen if the owner no longer wanted to let the land.

It had likely never occurred to them that anyone would want to break a contract with the government.

But the last segment of track just so happened to run through a large tract of such leased land. The owner was a major landlord whose family owned a number of other businesses, and initial talks had gone swimmingly. Although construction hadn't yet reached this plot, the landlord had already been paid. Yet completely out of the blue, the man reneged on the deal and returned every coin.

This landowner had no official title, but was well established and had close ties with the family of one Duke Zhao. No one dared show him any disrespect in the

face of his sudden decision, and his people all refused to speak with the representatives the Canal Commission sent. This development, however, came too late for the railway team to select a good alternative route. As things stood, they would have to make a long detour in order to avoid the now-unavailable land.

Gu Yun had fired off several letters asking when construction would be complete. He eventually sent a memorial directly to Li Feng, conveying that the rate of resupply was insufficient. If nothing improved, he would be forced to pull back the front line.

Fang Qin's youngest brother had yet to be exonerated of corruption charges. At this point, Grand Secretary Fang finally lost patience with what he saw as Fang Qin's paranoia and lack of finesse and took it upon himself to act. This venerated elder, once an instructor to half the court, did two things at once.

First, he met in secret with the official in the Foreign Affairs Department responsible for correspondence with the Far Westerners. He tactfully hinted that Great Liang might not have sufficient strength to sustain a war of attrition, and that continuing to fight would exhaust the people and drain the treasury, leaving no one better off in the end whether the war was won or not. With respect to the ongoing conflict, the greatest contributions oughtn't belong to the butchers who fought on the battlefield, but to the savvy men who would facilitate the negotiation of a treaty and return peace and prosperity to the land.

The foreign affairs official had been a student of Grand Secretary Fang in his youth. He cautiously asked him, "Teacher, if His Majesty has set his heart on winning the war, how are we subjects supposed to facilitate negotiation?"

"It all depends on what you say to the Far Westerners, and how you say it," said Grand Secretary Fang. He had an aloof aura about him, and his voice was heavy with implication. "They are interested in nothing besides their own profit. Do you imagine they would rather continue butting heads with Gu Yun, or take a step back and work with the pacifists in our own court to end the war and establish friendly relations? His Majesty and the nobles of the court prize their dignity. If the Far Westerners make a sincere show of swallowing their pride, it doesn't much matter what their true feelings toward us are, does it? Without the pressure of the front line, I don't doubt His Majesty would have much less patience for Prince Yan and his ilk's audacious behavior."

After sending away the foreign affairs official, who walked off blinking as if he'd freshly awoken from a stupor, Grand Secretary Fang did the second thing. He asked his wife to extend an invitation to quite an unusual guest: the Longan Emperor's wet nurse. The aging nurse had been honorably discharged from the palace for retirement some years ago; Madam Fang had looked after her for a time. The woman maintained a close personal relationship with the Fang family to this day.

Li Feng was terribly fond of his old nurse. Several days later, he was discussing business with Chang Geng when he heard she had requested entrance to the palace to visit the empress, who was suffering from a lengthy illness. He ended his conversation with Chang Geng at once and hurried off to the imperial harem.

Chang Geng strolled toward the gates. The imperial palace was wrapped in the cloak of twilight, which had robbed its thousands of colored-glass tiles of their golden shine. A translucent crust of ice took its place, chilly and inhospitable.

The first month of the year came bitterly cold, but the capital city was steaming hot.

The war was heating up on the front lines, and Gu Yun's letters had decreased in frequency. Those pages of idle ramblings had all but disappeared, and the rare personal missives he did send were no more than a few lines in length. Chang Geng huffed out a slow sigh. Staring off into the distance beneath the red palace walls, he thought to himself, *The sixteenth is the day after tomorrow.*

The haze hovering over their nation had yet to part to reveal the sun. His plan proceeded step by step, bringing his objective closer and closer, yet he was plagued by occasional flashes of unease.

A squadron of passing guards stepped forward to salute him. "Your Highness."

Chang Geng didn't make a sound. He and the guards stared awkwardly at each other for a moment. Then he turned and strode off as if possessed.

I must see Gu Zixi, he thought to himself. *Right now.*

Chapter 122:
In Dreams

IN THE COURSE of a person's life, there were always those moments where they felt their heart could fit nothing aside from a single absurd desire, a yearning so strong it could devour their soul in a single gulp. At such times, no matter how desperately rationality scrabbled at the sealed door of their mind, it would be ignored. Like how years before, when Gu Yun's mind had been fever-boiled into a bowl of slop in the barren lands of the northwest, his only thoughts had been of quitting his post and relieving himself of his duties to wander the ends of the earth. And like how now, years later, as Chang Geng trudged out from the innermost halls of the palace into a light flurry of snow, he could think of nothing but his desire to see Gu Yun just once, far away as he was on the other side of the nation.

Chang Geng remembered little of his rush back to the Marquis Estate. The pair of iron puppets standing guard at the gate turned to silently watch his passage. As he glanced into one of the puppets' glowing purple eyes, he came to a halt.

He stared at those iron monsters for a long time, as if slowly awakening from a dream, until he finally began to surface from his state of near madness. He set his hand lightly on the puppet's icy-cold arm, let his shoulders slump, and breathed out a frustrated sigh in a cloud of white steam.

He had parted and reunited with Gu Yun countless times. For a stretch of four years, they hadn't seen each other even once. Yet none of their separations had felt as torturous as this one. Chang Geng didn't know whether he was becoming more delicate with age or whether his insatiable appetite for Gu Yun was simply growing. He felt there was a string in his heart that had been winching tighter and tighter since he'd received Gu Yun's letter saying he missed him out of the blue. With every new hair-raising military report that reached the capital from the south, with every new twist and danger in the political situation in court, that string had pulled tighter, until now, it had snapped without warning.

The gates swung outward to admit Huo Dan, the captain of the Marquis Estate's guard. He was shocked at the sight of Chang Geng. "Uncle Wang asked me to find you. Your Highness, what's wrong?"

The rims of Chang Geng's eyes were red, but he swiftly summoned a faint smile to his lips. He straightened his spine and dusted the snow from his shoulders. "It's nothing. I'm a little dizzy because I walked too fast. Does Uncle Wang need me?"

Huo Dan wasn't the most sensitive fellow, and never suspected Chang Geng might've spoken anything less than the truth. He stepped forward to take his arm and said, low, "We have a visitor who requested discretion. He says he has urgent news to report. He couldn't petition for an audience at the Grand Council, so he's come to the Marquis Estate."

The visitor was a man in his mid-thirties. Despite feeling that he'd seen his face, Chang Geng couldn't immediately place him. He rapidly smoothed his turbulent thoughts as he combed through his memory for the visitor's identity. Fortunately, the man saved him the trouble: "This lower official is Liu Zhong,

Assistant Supervisor of the Foreign Affairs Mission. My greetings to Your Highness."

The so-called Foreign Affairs Mission was the project of a number of hardcore pacifists in the Ministry of War, who had at some point joined forces with others in the Imperial Court of State Ceremonial. Fearful of offending the Longan Emperor, they didn't dare call themselves a "peace envoy," and could only stamp the vague title of "foreign affairs mission" on their foreheads. Under the guise of promoting civil and military cooperation, they requested their members' deployment to the front lines on the bullshit pretense of "dispatching their enemies through alternative means." What they were actually doing was creating a larger headache for Gu Yun.

Chang Geng frowned. His impression of this group was far from positive, but he squashed any displeasure under his usual elegant demeanor. He offered the man a small nod. "Supervisor Liu must be about to depart. What urgent business brings you here so late at night?"

Liu Zhong stepped back and sank to his knees, then raised a palm in the air as if swearing an oath. "If this lower official speaks a single word of falsehood tonight, may I be struck by lightning from the heavens and my parents rest uneasily below the Nine Springs."

Chang Geng took a quick step to the side. "Supervisor Liu, what are you doing? Please rise."

Liu Zhong shook his head. "Your Highness, are you aware that the supervisor of our mission, this lower official's superior, was once a student of Grand Secretary Fang?"

Of course Chang Geng was aware. He had been disgusted with this supervisor for quite some time. If he weren't so tied up in other affairs, he'd have dragged these treacherous sycophants in the Foreign Affairs Mission out one by one and subjected them to a slow and painful death.

"Your Highness, please listen." Liu Zhong quickly divulged the secret instructions Grand Secretary Fang had given his superior. He stressed, "Only a few of my superior's closest confidantes are aware of this. This untalented lower official happens to be among them."

Chang Geng tapped his finger on the low table at his side. "Spilling secrets at the Marquis Estate in the middle of the night is not the conduct of a close confidante, is it?"

Liu Zhong dipped into a deep bow. "My family hails from Hangzhou, and my birth parents passed when I was young. I was raised by the elders in my family and later traveled the nation as a wandering scholar. I served as an advisor in the houses of marquises and dukes, and thanks to a fortunate encounter, caught the eye of the Fang family patriarch, who recommended me for official service. The debt I owe him is difficult to repay."

Chang Geng raised a brow.

"I had an innocent childhood sweetheart in my youth, and we were engaged but not yet wedded." Liu Zhong hung his head, his shoulders hunched. "I planned to return home and ask for her hand properly when I had made a name for myself. But before that day could come, she was assaulted by a nobleman…"

Liu Zhong wiped at his face and kowtowed, pressing his forehead to the ground. “Although the deceased are dead and gone, the living hold onto their regrets. Your Highness, I beg your sympathy.”

Chang Geng sighed. “Supervisor Liu, rise. Let us speak.”

Their quiet conversation continued long into the night. When Chang Geng finally saw Liu Zhong to the gate, the clapper of the night watch was already sounding through the streets. Chang Geng lingered for a while, pinching the space between his brows, then turned to Huo Dan. “Captain, please check if Miss Chen has retired for the night. If she hasn’t, I’d like to see her.”

Chen Qingxu had been occupying a guest room at the Marquis Estate in preparation for her attempt to cure Chang Geng’s wu’ergu. But it was sure to be a lengthy process, and Prince Yan was always busy, only leaving the palace to return home once every ten or fifteen days. Chen Qingxu detected something off in Chang Geng’s complexion the moment she saw him. “Your Highness, the heavier your heart grows, the more difficult it will be to control yourself. Have you been getting enough rest?”

The laugh that escaped Chang Geng was a grim one. He had intensified the conflicts in court ahead of schedule and hadn’t had time to make proper preparations for everything. Every step he took was as treacherous as if he walked along the edge of a sheer cliff and might find himself stepping out into empty air at any moment.

But he was out of time.

He feared his enemies would strike at any moment. More than that, he feared Gu Yun was reporting all of his successes and none of his failures, suffering some unknown hurt where he couldn’t see.

“Miss Chen,” Chang Geng said. “If it’s convenient for you, why don’t we begin treatment today?”

Chen Qingxu was startled. “The process may be very painful. You’re busy with your work in court every day; will you be able to handle it?”

“I don’t know.” Chang Geng shook his head. “But I have a bad feeling about all this. Every day I feel less able to suppress the poison. Perhaps it is time for drastic measures.”

Two hours later, Chang Geng discovered he had underestimated what Chen Qingxu meant by *painful*.

Chen Qingxu handed him a bowl of medicine and went to prepare her acupuncture needles.

“What is this?” said Chang Geng, accepting the bowl.

“When you are no longer ensnared by the wu’ergu, I will give you a copy of the prescription,” Chen Qingxu said. “But for now, it’s best if you don’t ask.”

Chang Geng stared back at her mutely.

He didn’t know why, but to him, everything connected to barbarian poisons stank of corpse oil. Her words seemed to pluck at a web of unpleasant connections in his mind, and he immediately swallowed his questions. He curled his tongue, pinched his nose, and downed the bowl in a single large gulp.

Chen Qingxu leaned down to light a stick of pacifying incense, allowing the cool, sedate fragrance to disperse through the room. She sat down a few paces from Chang Geng, her face stern. “Your Highness, once I begin the acupuncture treatment, you must maintain clarity of mind and spirit. If you succumb to the madness, no one will be able to wake you. Do you understand?”

Chang Geng nodded.

“Once this stick of pacifying incense burns out, I will begin,” Chen Qingxu continued. “Your Highness, please use this time to clear your mind of any distractions.”

He felt nothing at first. Chen Qingxu was steady and accurate in her needle placement, her movements deft. Chang Geng closed his eyes and relaxed under her hands. But as she continued to work, a wave of cold terror rushed up his spine. He felt as though someone had raised a lethal weapon over his head and it was too late to move—he had no choice but to close his eyes and wait for the blow to fall. All the muscles in his back tensed, a subconscious attempt to dodge despite his helpless immobility.

Chen Qingxu couldn’t place any more needles. She straightened, a grim set to her mouth. “Your Highness.”

Chang Geng felt an invisible whip crack across his back. A roar filled his ears, a decade’s worth of curses in a woman’s voice washing over him at once. Drowning in bygone nightmares, he smelled the pacifying incense and heard Chen Qingxu’s words cut through: “Your Highness, you’re in the Marquis Estate. Can you hear me?”

He shuddered, mustering all his remaining strength to give her a weak nod.

Chen Qingxu placed the next needle. Noting that the second stick of pacifying incense had burned out, she glanced at the western clock on the table. “This is only the beginning. Your Highness, do you need a moment before we go on?”

Chang Geng bit lightly on the tip of his tongue. “No. Continue.”

She said no more as she applied the rest of the needles at top speed. The visions that had receded surged back with a fury, every cut and bruise Xiu-niang had inflicted on his youthful body flaring to life one by one.

Brows knit, Chen Qingxu watched as an old scar over Chang Geng’s collarbone turned red and swollen, seeping beads of blood as the spiderweb of vessels surrounding it burst beneath the skin, a terrifying sight.

“Your Highness!”

There was no reaction from her patient.

Chen Qingxu’s hand stilled, afraid to continue. Her eyes snagged on a set of iron pauldrons hanging at the foot of the bed. They looked dated—the military had long since changed to a different style. Chen Qingxu abruptly recalled a long-ago conversation with Chang Geng about the symptoms of the wu’ergu. He had casually mentioned that the first time he escaped from the grip of its nightmares, it had been thanks to some pieces of armor Gu Yun had hung at the head of Chang Geng’s bed.

Chen Qingxu’s arm shot out with a sweep of her long sleeve, and the iron pauldrons clanged against each other with a crisp, melodious sound, echoing through the quiet room. Chang Geng’s ragged breaths paused. Layer upon layer of

hallucinations arrayed themselves before his eyes. He was trapped in the body of his childhood self—the sharp point of a hairpin, a red-hot poker, a dirty horsewhip, a woman's hands, nails sharp as iron claws—and at the end of everything, Gu Yun, half-clad in a suit of iron armor, silently watching him across a distance of years.

Chang Geng fixed his eyes on him like he was his last hope, clinging to his final thread of rationality. After what might have been ages, the menagerie of demons and ghouls surrounding him slowly fell away, and Chang Geng came back to himself with a bone-deep exhaustion. The pacifying incense on the table had burned out, and Chen Qingxu was putting away her acupuncture needles.

He discovered, belatedly, that he could move again.

"How do you feel?" Chen Qingxu asked quietly.

Chang Geng flexed his arm, spotting a new thicket of fine scrapes on his skin. They had scabbed over already, and itched a little. He experimentally closed his hand into a fist. "Like I dragged myself out of it all over again."

After bidding Chen Qingxu farewell, Chang Geng collapsed into bed and slept. His sleep had always been like a still pond, easily shattered by the disturbance of a single pebble. Aside from the incident in Jiangbei when he had lost too much blood, he rarely lost consciousness so totally. Yet tonight, not only did he not stir, he slept for the first time without nightmares.

Instead, he dreamed he stood at the foot of an observation tower looming high in the air. Fires burned in the distance and soldiers stood on guard within the garrison. The atmosphere was oppressive, as if everyone slept with weapons beneath their pillows. Chang Geng watched a group of soldiers return from patrol, tugging on their horses' reins to bring them to a halt. Suddenly, their leader looked back in Chang Geng's direction—it was Gu Yun. Wearing a glass monocle more garish than any ornamental mask, he threw Chang Geng a teasing smile, silver filigree glinting atop black-iron armor.

In the dream, a laugh bubbled up from Chang Geng's throat. "What the hell are you wearing?"

Gu Yun reached down from his seat atop the horse with one violet-gold-powered arm and pulled Chang Geng up to sit in front of him with an effortless tug. He looped his arms around Chang Geng's waist and laughed into his ear. "It's lonely in the army. I thought I'd seduce a beauty or two."

It was always difficult to hide the fluctuations of one's emotions in a dream. Though he knew Gu Yun was joking, Chang Geng felt a wave of hurt. "I've spent countless sleepless nights in the capital, afraid to take a single misstep. All I hope for each day is a single word from you. Yet it never arrives."

"Your Highness, did you come all this way to throw a tantrum?" Gu Yun said helplessly.

Chang Geng feared he had a point. He yearned to mimic those popular storybooks and make all sorts of unreasonable demands of Gu Yun, but like a scholar realizing his studies were insufficient only when it came time to apply his knowledge, he found his technique underdeveloped. He stumbled over his words, not knowing where to begin. Gu Yun plucked the glass monocle from his face and turned to kiss Chang Geng's cheek. "If you don't like it, I won't wear it."

At dawn, Chang Geng woke to the imagined sound of Gu Yun's horrendous flute playing. He sat up dazedly and scrubbed at his eyes, feeling as if that terrible

wail still echoed in his mind. He rubbed his sore ears, but couldn't keep a smile from tugging up the corners of his lips.

It was the best dream he'd ever had.

Accompanied by Gu Yun's melody, dreadful enough to make demons and deities weep, Chang Geng thought that even if he stood before the wicked god himself, he would have nothing to fear.

Many kilometers away, as Gu Yun returned from patrol on the front lines the previous night, he had felt a mysterious itch between his shoulder blades, as if someone was watching him from behind. He had whipped his head around, inadvertently flinging the glass monocle off his face. The lens survived the fall, but the elaborate filigree frame had chipped when it collided with his armor. He had to admit, to his consternation, that while the trinket made a good accessory, it wasn't practical. He switched back to his usual one.

When Shen Yi heard the story the next morning, he had a good laugh at Gu Yun's expense. "Maybe some deity got fed up with your airs."

"That deity needs to mind their own business," Gu Yun said shamelessly. "Maybe they saw how handsome I was and meant to offer themselves as a wife."

A soldier stepped forward with a report before Shen Yi could hock up last night's dinner. "Sir, the envoys you dispatched to Dongying have sent a reply."

"Let's have it," Gu Yun said.

The Far Western Army's supply lines stretched across the ocean and through Dongying, and depended on that nation's cooperation. They had been an accessory to this war from the very beginning, but had craftily avoided any open involvement. Even when Liao Chi had attempted to kidnap the Longan Emperor with the aid of several dozen Dongying warriors disguised as monks, he had acted out of a personal grudge, and his birth nation hadn't demanded justice on his behalf.

"What does it say?" Shen Yi asked.

Gu Yun shook his head. "They say the Dongying people were very polite, but hard to pin down. As soon as the envoys attempted any serious discussion, no one with authority would meet with them; they fobbed them off with some handsome young men and beautiful dancing women to entertain them… Dongying is running its own calculations here. If the Far Westerners put down roots in our soil, Dongying can look forward to a bellyful of carrion by simply trailing in their wake. But if the Far Western navy is defeated, they're still our neighbors across the East Sea. They'll contribute to the Far Western war effort, but they aren't willing to offend us outright."

Shen Yi frowned. "What makes them think they can play both sides like this?"

"Actually, they're doing us a favor." Gu Yun smiled. "I'm relieved to see them so two-faced. Just wait, they'll be useful later on."

"We can't wait much longer." Shen Yi shook his head. "We're overextended in the south, and our violet gold stores are stretched thin. Even if you personally coordinate the allocation, we'll run out sooner or later. Not to mention, if the fighting doesn't let up, we're sure to hear voices of dissent from the court."

A serious look returned to Gu Yun's face.

“The court thinks we should back down,” Shen Yi reminded him. “They want to try diplomacy—you know they’ve been organizing some foreign affairs envoy. If these people are really coming to help reopen negotiations, great. But in the worst case, they’re coming specifically to make trouble.”

Gu Yun thought to himself. “When are they arriving?”

“They should depart the capital any day now,” Shen Yi said. “It won’t take them more than half a month to get here—Zixi, what are your plans?”

Chapter 123:
Dawn

AFTER FACING EACH OTHER on the front lines for so long, fighting countless battles large and small, neither the Far Western nor Great Liang armies were willing to back down. The two opposing forces were roughly equal in strength, and neither could gain the upper hand. On the sixteenth day of the first month, availing themselves of the early light of dawn, a large fleet of Great Liang's sea dragon warships slipped out of port and glided soundlessly along the river, splitting Great Liang's already lean forces.

The sun had yet to rise. Under cover of darkness, Shen Yi turned to Gu Yun. "Don't you think you're being too reckless?"

Gu Yun acted as if he hadn't heard. "Have someone make me a bowl of noodles come morning. With an egg," he added nonsensically.

Shen Yi's focus was split in so many directions he was on the verge of vertigo. Baffled, it took him half an age to remember what day it was. "Well, aren't you relaxed," he muttered.

He whispered some quiet instructions to a personal guard before picking up where he'd left off. "Didn't you say you'd wait till the railway tracks were laid? If we can manage to establish a dedicated transport corridor for violet gold, our chances of victory will be much higher. Make any move now, and the slightest miscoordination… It's too risky!"

"No risk, no reward," Gu Yun said, unfazed. "Look at me, I'm a man in my prime. Why should I be as cautious and timid as that old geezer across the river?"

Seeing Gu Yun had lapsed back into aimless boasting, Shen Yi snapped, "Gu Zixi!"

Gu Yun sighed, turning his eyes north; his eyes could no longer glimpse anything so distant.

"Jiping," Gu Yun began, voice low, "this war would have been won ages ago if the court had been united. You tell me what carries the greater risk—forcing them to meet us now in battle or allowing our adversary to protract the war until turmoil upends our court?"

Shen Yi stared, speechless. As a general tasked with protecting the nation's borders, he needed only organize his troops and lay out his defense. It wasn't his job to consider the bigger picture, nor to worry about the possibility of Great Liang becoming embroiled in another military conflict fifty years down the line.

"We must clinch this battle before the pacifists open their mouths. Otherwise, who knows how long those traitorous bastards will drag this out. The first beat of the war drum invigorates the soldiers' morale, the second weakens it, and the third drains it dry. Even if we step back to recover our strength, we can't afford to rest for more than a few years. Once the immediate wounds have healed, the noble sons of the northern capital will forget past pains, and when our generation passes on, our posterity will grow up believing the southern half of our nation has always been jointly governed." Gu Yun glanced at Shen Yi. "The risk is worth it. When the time

comes, I'll leave you the Black Iron Tiger Tally. If worse comes to worst…rally our remaining forces and wait it out. Keep your head and mobilize the Black Iron Battalion to serve as temporary reinforcements. The Westerners may be masters of naval warfare, but you've got nothing to fear from them on land. We'd still have options."

Shen Yi was sure to have wrinkles from frowning so much. Before he could say more, a mess officer arrived with a bowl of noodles. Specially prepared for the marshal with utmost care, the longevity noodles were smooth and uniform in texture. The soup was hearty, the meat generous, the egg perfectly done—there were even a few thinly sliced bamboo shoots bobbing in the broth.

Gu Yun accepted the bowl and shoveled two large bites into his mouth before pausing. "Why aren't there any greens?"

Shen Yi was mystified. "You don't eat greens."

"Since when do I not eat greens…" Gu Yun grumbled. He gulped down a few more mouthfuls, but couldn't shake the feeling something was missing. After considering at length, he realized: birthdays and holidays were entirely human inventions. Someone who willingly took the time to conduct such a simple ceremony on another's behalf was saying without words, *I care for you*.

The taste he craved derived not from ordinary ingredients, but from the feelings ladled into that simple bowl of broth.

Five days later, Gu Yun received a letter with the names of the envoys sent from the capital. He gave the list a cursory glance before handing it to Shen Yi. "You see? We've no choice but to strike first."

If those were the marshal's orders, it wasn't as if Shen Yi could disobey.

"Just in case, Jiping, there are some things I need to tell you. If it comes to it, you'll take charge in my stead. You have the strength to go toe to toe with the Westerners on land, but avoid the sea at all costs. You lack the naval battle experience to match that old bastard." As he spoke, Gu Yun retrieved four sealed letters from the commander's tent. "Send this first military dispatch to the capital if all goes according to plan. If instead the heavens turn their back on us, send the second letter to the Grand Council. You'll have their complete cooperation and aid. Don't forget to append a memorial begging forgiveness and seal it with the Black Iron Tiger Tally. I'll take full responsibility. The last two are personal. Send the third to Chang Geng to calm him down. Once things have settled, give him the fourth when you have the chance."

"What is this, your last will and testament?" Shen Yi was furious.

"Do I need to give you my last will and testament when preparing to deal with a troop of Far Western monkeys?" Gu Yun arched a brow. "This is called due diligence. And anyway, it saves me the trouble of having to write all these letters again. Orders are orders—now stop running your mouth and get back to work!"

The next evening, Great Liang's navy launched a surprise attack, breaking through the Western forces' defense line with guns blazing. The two sides were by now familiar with each other's tactics, and the battle escalated the moment they clashed. Despite being caught off guard, the Western navy quickly regrouped to mount a counteroffensive. They could sense from the outset that Great Liang's navy was fighting especially ferociously this time around.

Mister Ja had pulled a coat over his nightgown. Why would Gu Yun break the stalemate on the front lines now? Nothing in their latest intelligence had indicated such a move—given what they knew about the current state of Great Liang's court, it was beyond the realm of reason. And yet Gu Yun didn't even bother with routine reconnaissance this time, as if unconcerned with the depth of the enemy's violet gold reserves. He ordered his men to bring out the heavy artillery and launch cuttlefish like a pelting rain. Caught unawares, the Western flagship took several direct hits, and its freshly repaired side oars sank back underwater, paralyzed.

Chaos descended.

"Do not panic!" Mister Ja grabbed a copper squall. "Stand by for orders! Assemble all dragonets! Intercept them… Your Holiness!"

The pope strode out onto the deck and surveyed the battlefield through a hand-held field scope.

"Calm yourselves," he ordered, voice low.

This venerated leader had the near-magical ability to pacify a soldier's frenzied heart. A few quietly spoken words, and the panic-stricken sailors around him promptly fell still, awaiting his command.

"The enemy's vanguard is half its usual size. It's unlike Gu Yun to launch such a fierce attack at a numerical disadvantage," the pope murmured. "Why would he do this?"

Mister Ja composed himself with some difficulty. "The Great Liang folk have lost their minds. Perhaps we shouldn't see it as an attack, but as a bid for mutual destruction."

The pope shook his head, turning to give a messenger instructions about adjusting the corvette fleet's formation. "That makes no sense."

Mister Ja frowned, mulling over his words. Long seconds later, he exclaimed, "That's right! Your Holiness received communication from the enemy camp a few days ago that a diplomatic envoy was due to arrive on the front lines. Could this be related?"

The pope tilted his head slightly. "You mean to suggest a rift has formed within Great Liang's imperial court, and these envoys wish to negotiate terms to end the war?"

"It's not unreasonable," Mister Ja answered, gaining steam. "Consider, Your Holiness: Did we not estimate how long it would take Great Liang to complete their railway? At the time, Your Holiness said we would be at a disadvantage once they got it running. We drew up a number of plans to destroy their tracks. But based on our calculations, this railway line should have finished construction by the end of last year. In fact, we thought they'd have begun their trial runs by now—yet there's been no movement on that front at all. They must have encountered some internal difficulty!"

The pope crossed an arm over his chest and stroked his chin. By now, Gu Yun's vanguard had pierced the Western fleet's defensive perimeter like a blade, cresting the waves in a ferocious charge. The Western escort fleet encircled their commander's vessel in response, forming an impenetrable wall, while armored hawks launched from their flagship into the sky to rain attacks on their enemies from above.

“If it were me,” Mister Ja offered, unbidden, “I would order our flagship to fall back and draw the enemy’s vanguard in, then surround and annihilate them. They can’t maintain such an intense barrage for long. We’ll send them to a watery grave the moment they break off from the rest of their fleet.”

“Do you really think Gu Yun would commit such a rudimentary mistake?” The pope’s voice was calm.

Mister Ja failed to respond.

“The most important thing on the battlefield is to know your enemy. Relay my orders: gather in our flanks and focus on defense. Set a course due southeast and call for reinforcements, now.” The pope methodically issued orders as he carried on his conversation with Mister Ja. “If you analyze Gu’s quelling of the rebellion in the East Sea and the capture of the mountain bandits in the southwest—as well as the handful of times we fought against him in the north—you will gain a rough understanding of Gu Yun’s character. When at a true material disadvantage, he obscures the truth, even conjuring up the awe-inspiring Black Iron Battalion to frighten his adversaries… The Great Liang folk refer to this tactic as validating that which is false and falsifying that which is true.”

Mister Ja found this explanation wanting, but he dared not protest. “As you say, Your Holiness.”

“Watch—this is just bait,” the pope said with a smile. “We must be patient and draw the line out a little further. Soon, we’ll see what cards he holds.”

A messenger ran over with a report. “Your Holiness, our first, second, and third squadrons have just left port on an open-sea mission. What should we do…”

This open-sea mission was serving as the armed escort for the cargo ships sailing to and from the Holy Empire with supplies.

“They won’t have gotten far,” the pope said without looking back. “Recall them. The open-sea corridor is secure; there’s no need to send three squadrons to escort such a small amount of cargo. We must treat our dear old foe with the respect he deserves.”

“Yes, Your Holiness!”

The pope’s orders came one after another:

“Return to port! Gather in the left and right flanks!”

“All corvettes, set course due southeast. Mind your speed—”

“All hawks, fall back! Raise steel defensive panels on the flagship, activate the bilge pumps—”

The Western fleet drew back into a densely packed behemoth. The armed cargo escort that had just departed swiftly returned to harbor and turned predatory eyes on the intrepid Great Liang navy cutting toward them through the water before forming an impenetrable defense. In the past, it had always been Gu Yun leading the Westerners by the nose. Now the tables had turned, and the Westerners used their robust defense to hold Great Liang’s vanguard at bay while searching for a vulnerable spot to bury their fangs.

Half an hour later, Great Liang’s rabid charge finally began to slow. Clearly, they were starting to tire.

“Ja, look,” the pope murmured.

He had hardly finished speaking before a large fleet of Great Liang's reinforcement and supply ships swarmed toward them from the left, right, and center. The Great Liang troops had finally revealed their trump card, baring their vicious fangs in the dark of night. Mister Ja was stunned—if they'd gone with his proposal and sent their flanks to surround Great Liang's vanguard, they would have lost three squadrons to the effort and overextended themselves, allowing the Great Liang ships lying in wait to tear effortlessly through their weakened defense.

"As I said." The pope gave him a look of gentle reproach. "Only by understanding your enemy will you find your true window of opportunity—all ships, prepare to fire! Strike them head-on before they can stabilize their formation!"

The Westerners' cannon fire swept outward like a tidal wave. Great Liang's main forces, split into three, had barely stepped onto the field before suffering heavy casualties, the sea dragon warships leading the charge sinking one after another with no opportunity to return fire. With one attack, the Western cannons wiped out nearly a quarter of Great Liang's troops.

The sailors of the Western fleet erupted in cheers. Since the day Gu Yun took control of the Liangjiang theater, they had never once gained such a commanding upper hand.

Across the water, Gu Yun wasn't at all the sorry sight they imagined.

He stood aboard an unremarkable, mid-sized sea dragon in the center of the Great Liang fleet, watching as a large swath of his "warships" foundered under enemy fire. He didn't even blink as he said to the personal guard beside him, "See, what did I tell you? Know thyself, know thine enemy. That old bastard could spend decades preparing for a single battle. He must have studied me carefully."

Had it not been the dead of night, the Westerners would have rapidly discovered that all those sunken ships were empty shells, much like the cuttlefish submersibles.

This rotten idea had been cooked up by the impoverished mechanics of the Lingshu Institute. In a fit of inspiration, they'd gathered up the frontline warships that had been relegated to scrap, stripped them down to their hulls, and refitted them with a replica of the cuttlefish subs' propulsion system. Gutting the interior left the vessels extremely light, allowing them to travel great distances unmanned with only a little thrust. They weren't terribly useful as ships, but they were perfect as a bluff to frighten their enemies.

The Westerners would have surely grown suspicious if Gu Yun had mobilized a portion of his naval forces and made a show of stepping onto the battlefield himself. Thus, he used this tactic to deceive the enemy.

"It's to our own advantage if they get carried away by their momentary success," Gu Yun said, crossing one leg over the other. "Spread out, and mark this: our mission today is to stall the enemy as long as necessary."

The guard licked his lips nervously. "Sir, will our comrades make it in time?"

"Only heaven knows. If they don't, then it seems fate has finally abandoned me." Gu Yun chuckled softly. "Remember, be flexible."

On the Western flagship, Mister Ja had indeed allowed his joy over their victory to swell his head. Although, with His Holiness at his side, he dared not get too carried away.

He soon discovered that, despite this setback, the enemy navy was far more tenacious than expected. After their initial stumble, Great Liang quickly changed tack, hounding the Westerners with Gu Yun's infuriating battle tactics. What should have been a one-sided drubbing soon became an even match.

The clash between the two forces dragged on till morning.

The first sliver of sunlight split the sea, laying bare the scattered battle formations that had survived the long night. On Great Liang's flagship, a guard was saying anxiously, "Sir, we've yet to receive word from the other squad. I recommend we withdraw for now—our position will be exposed if we continue this fight. We don't have an impregnable iron monster like them—you mustn't endanger yourself!"

Gu Yun ran a finger over the frame of his glass monocle. "Patience."

On the Western sea monster, the pope shoved his field scope into Mister Ja's hands. "That enemy ship—that's their flagship! Gu Yun must be aboard. Capture it at once!"

Concentrated artillery fire shifted at the pope's command, cornering Gu Yun's flagship in an instant.

"Marshal!" the guard cried.

A handful of corvettes acted without orders and rushed out to shield the flagship from the incoming fusillade as a deafening explosion rocked the flagship. Gu Yun's face froze as another sailor stumbled in. "Sir, we can't hold them any longer!"

Gu Yun narrowed his eyes. "Steady now… Shift the rearguard to the van. Let's take our enemies for a walk," Gu Yun muttered. "Starting with—"

His orders were drowned by the shriek of a hawk so shrill it pierced even Gu Yun's half-deaf ears. He whipped his head around.

This was the signal he and Shen Yi had agreed upon—the ground squad had succeeded.

The guard leapt to his feet. "That's our hawk!"

"Hand me my field scope," Gu Yun ordered.

The guard licked cracked lips. "Sir, we…"

"Look out!"

Boom—

An enemy cannonball slipped through a gap between corvettes and struck the Great Liang flagship's stern. The sea dragon rocked and shuddered, pouring smoke and sparks.

Amid the clamor, a glass monocle arced through the air and hit the deck, splintering into dust.

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, before the Foreign Affairs Mission had set so much as a foot in Jiangnan, Li Feng was rudely awakened by an emergency military dispatch from the front lines.

The letter was sealed with the Black Iron Tiger Tally—there had been a great victory in Liangjiang.

The plan Gu Yun had meticulously laid out over the past half year had finally borne fruit. No one knew when he had sent agents south to instigate rebellion among the Western-occupied islands of the South Sea, or when he had dispatched a large force to lie in ambush along the southwestern border.

On the twenty-first day of the first month, Great Liang's navy mobilized a portion of its main force to mount a surprise attack on the Western navy, exploiting their commander's cautious nature to pin the enemy troops in their harbor. Simultaneously, the Great Liang sea dragon warships lurking along the southern border swept through the South Sea Islands and, in coordination with Gu Yun's agents and the revolting populace, wiped out the occupying Western forces. They immediately sent troops to cut off their enemies' supply route through the South Sea and throttle their adversaries' necks before they could react.

Who said Great Liang's navy was incapable of waging war on the high seas?

The report was concise, proclaiming the victory without going into any detail about the battle or its casualties. The battered Western fleet retreated to the Dongying archipelago, and revolts erupted across the entire southern half of the nation as local militia seized their chance to overthrow the occupying enemy troops. It was the first glimmer of dawn on the long-dormant front lines.

Leaping out of bed, Li Feng threw on his clothes, ready to call a grand assembly right there in the middle of the night. Forget that shitty Foreign Affairs Mission—they wouldn't allow the Westerners to take so much as a clump of soil if they could beat them back to where they came from.

Palace attendants buzzed around him in a panicked flurry. Li Feng had gone through a number of attendants since Zhu Xiaojiao's death, but none had been to his liking. The attendant currently serving him was a reticent old man who had his moments of quick-wittedness. "Congratulations, Your Majesty. With Marshal Gu on the front lines, we're sure to see the recovery of Jiangnan!"

Li Feng laughed brightly, nearly incoherent with excitement. "At this rate, we'll no longer have to worry about explaining ourselves to our ancestors beneath the Nine Springs!"

The emperor, who had been limping around since his injury months ago, sprinted from his bedchamber as if carried by the wind. Yet halfway to his destination, an early morning breeze trickled past, cooling the Longan Emperor's fevered brain. The joy coloring his face faded.

This was indeed a stunning victory. But what came next?

A number of policies had been implemented by the Grand Council for the ostensible purpose of prioritizing the war effort above all. Meanwhile, aside from brandishing their iron certificates and weaponizing their seniority before Li Feng, the representatives from the major noble families had never left off trying to negotiate an armistice. Li Feng himself had wavered between continuing to fight and suing for peace, but now, Gu Yun's victory tipped the proverbial scale in Li Feng's mind heavily to one side.

The noble families have grown bold. They even dare interfere in matters of war, the emperor mused in silence. *What are their intentions?*

Li Feng's footsteps came to a halt. He turned to his attendant and said out of the blue, "It's been many years since our nurse, Lady Zhao, last entered the imperial palace. Do you still remember her?"

Flummoxed, the palace attendant lowered his head with an affirmative hum. "I've heard Madam Zhao has only one child—a daughter, who works in the palace. She's taken the third young master of the Fang family as her godson. She submitted a number of requests to enter the palace a while back, presumably to plead on his behalf."

Li Feng hummed thoughtfully and narrowed his eyes. "When a prince breaks the law, he is punished, just like a commoner. I don't recall anyone stepping forward to beg for mercy back when Prince Wei was relegated to the imperial dungeons. Yet each of these noble sons is so precious?"

Sensing his dangerous mood, the palace attendant glanced cautiously at Li Feng and dared not say another word. The sharp wind had cooled the hot sweat on Li Feng's brow. He pressed a hand to his chest and coughed quietly. The palace attendant hastily draped a fox-fur cloak over his shoulders.

The crown prince was old enough to exhibit the first signs of his future character—he was clever, but gentle in temperament; nothing like the fiery Li Feng. He resembled rather the late Yuanhe Emperor. But what had been the state of the nation during the Yuanhe Emperor's reign? Li Feng vividly remembered his father's insecurities. He had always felt his throne illegitimately inherited and struck bargains with all manner of individuals, asking this or that person for advice over the most trivial matters. Though all that remained of the Gu family was a half-grown child, he had failed to seize control of Great Liang's military power and left that infernal Black Iron Tiger Tally in the hands of an outsider. He was frequently overcome by sentiment, and had raised a swarm of termites that had eaten through the largest part of the substantial wealth passed down by Emperor Wu.

After a decade of effort, Li Feng still had yet to mop up the mess left behind by the late emperor. But in recent years, he had increasingly felt the gap between his strength and his ambition. He did not wish to leave his son in a similar predicament.

Yet given the present circumstances, whom could he trust?

Prince Yan?

It had been Prince Yan himself who stated he had no desire for marriage or children, and that his only wish was to follow the ways of the Lord of Shang and sacrifice his all for the good of Great Liang. If Prince Yan had meant to flatter him, there were plenty of other blandishments more pleasing to imperial ears—only look at the shameless officials who shed bitter tears over their devotion to the nation despite conclusive evidence of their treachery. Li Feng had indeed been momentarily moved by Prince Yan's words. But time had returned him to his senses.

Li Feng protected Chang Geng because he saw the value in his reforms. Prince Yan was right about one thing: laws and institutions took priority over all else. No matter what it was Prince Yan truly sought with his reforms, it was a fact that this badly battered nation was changing for the better. If Li Feng could leverage Prince Yan to cure the country of the deep-rooted rot of the previous reign, he might

yet pass down a well-ordered nation to the young crown prince. At the same time, he couldn't possibly leave his lamblike son in the care of his ruthless younger brother. Before it came time for him to follow in the late emperor's footsteps, the first two subjects he would do away with would be Prince Yan and Gu Yun.

"Forget it. Back to the palace—we'll call for a grand assembly come morning. At dawn, summon the crown prince," Li Feng instructed to the great confusion of his attendant. Moments ago, the emperor had been going on about Madam Zhao, yet now, after a few beats of silence, he suddenly brought up the crown prince.

"Also," Li Feng continued, "where is the memorial? Bring it here; we want to take a look."

This was a memorial written by Xu Ling on the reformation of the Imperial Academy's bylaws. The ideas were underdeveloped, even immature—but no matter. It could be tossed to the Grand Council to be refined. The imperial court was baying for blood, eager to see those who had cheated on the imperial examinations executed for their crimes. Only a handful of scholars still had the presence of mind to consider the future.

Li Feng was like any father; if possible, he wished to provide his young son a few more years of protection, a little longer spent playing with grass-woven insects in the inner palace. Yet who but heaven knew what this turbulent age had in store?

The next morning, news of the great victory on the Liangjiang battlefront struck the court like a slap to the face. The various forces of the capital were given no time to react as, in an unprecedented move, Li Feng made his position clear by proclaiming two new policies at the grand assembly that very day.

First, he allowed the Grand Council to abolish the war beacon tickets and revise national monetary policy. This would become known to future generations as the New Longan Decree.

Second, he declared that he agreed in principle with the memorial Xu Ling had submitted on behalf of the Department of Supervision and the Imperial Censorate to reform the Imperial Academy. As for any flaws in the proposal, he ordered the Grand Council to take the lead in collaborating with the Ministry of Rites, the Imperial Academy, and the two regulatory departments to revise the document.

At the same time, Li Feng openly took Jiang Chong and the Lingshu Institute to task in the main hall. He ordered the former to expedite the investigation into the imperial examination fraud case that spanned nine provinces. All those implicated were to suffer severe punishment, irrespective of family background. He then instructed the Lingshu Institute to draw up whatever plans they needed to bring the steam locomotive into operation. They couldn't afford to waste this victory and allow the Westerners time to catch their breath. If the war was to be won, it must be now, in one fell swoop.

As the grand assembly drew to a close, Li Feng made a final pronouncement: the eleven-year-old crown prince was to begin listening in on business in court.

Chapter 124:
Endgame (Part I)

THE CRYPTIC LONGAN EMPEROR had never so clearly expressed his stance. He hadn't revealed so much as a word of his thoughts to anyone in advance. It wasn't only Fang Qin's faction—even the Grand Council was flabbergasted.

Jiang Chong shot Prince Yan a surreptitious glance. *Did His Majesty take the wrong medicine today?*

Unfazed, Chang Geng offered a few bland words of flattery. Despite his engagement in politics, he had a distant, ethereal aura, as if removed from the mundane concerns of human society. He was unflappable even when doling out adulation, which only strengthened the impression that he was in cahoots with Li Feng.

Certain individuals' expressions shifted as they watched.

Li Feng was well aware that Prince Yan had been leaning on imperial authority. All the civil and military officials of the court had their own agendas. It didn't matter. He could help Prince Yan out of his predicament as easily as he could lend his assistance to anyone else. This time, Li Feng had used two imperial decrees to push the Grand Council into the eye of the storm. He wanted to see how those iron-certificate-brandishing nobles so favored by the Yuanhe Emperor handled this upstart prince, who had come into his role already half-grown and only addressed the late emperor as "father" once in his life.

It was sure to be another sleepless night in the capital.

In the office of the Grand Council, Jiang Chong spoke quietly to Chang Geng. "Your Highness, what should we do? Do we proceed with our original plan?"

Chang Geng replied without hesitation. "We strike while the iron is hot."

Jiang Chong shot Chang Geng a glance before continuing. "Your Highness, what if we push too hard and they do something drastic?"

Chang Geng turned to look at him, voice heavy with implication. "What I truly fear is that they won't. Hanshi-xiong, do you know the most useful piece of advice I've ever received?"

Jiang Chong felt an inexplicable frisson of apprehension.

"On the battlefield, whoever clings to life is the first to die."

By chance, on his way home from the office of the Grand Council, Chang Geng's carriage encountered Fang Qin's in a narrow lane. He motioned to Huo Dan. "Let Minister Fang go first."

Huo Dan assented, only to hurry back a moment later. "Your Highness, Minister Fang says that he wouldn't dare act so discourteously. He has already cleared the way."

Chang Geng lifted the window screen of his carriage and politely cupped his hands toward Fang Qin. The two brushed past each other with utmost cordiality, not

at all like the irreconcilable adversaries they were.

Chang Geng leaned against the wall of his carriage. If he were in Fang Qin's place, he thought, he would lie low and wait for these latest developments to blow over. Then, after the young upstarts of the imperial court had seized control of transportation and public finance, but while their positions were yet unstable from their rapid ascent, he would give the situation a final push and silently wait for Li Feng to take action. The imperial court was shrouded in a complex web of aristocratic connections, with influence and intrigue lurking in every corner. So long as those who sought to restore the old system had the patience to wait out the war and laid their plans carefully, there would be another opportunity.

Chang Geng had a good grasp of Fang Qin's steady nature; he was certain that this was his thinking as well. Even if Chang Geng had to drag everyone behind him as he walked this tightrope, he would do it if it meant denying Fang Qin peace of mind as he waited for his moment to arrive.

Fang Qin watched Prince Yan's carriage dwindle into the distance before instructing his coachman to be on their way. Wrapped in the purple of twilight as dusk slipped into deep night, he seemed to see the current of time rushing past in a tumultuous stream, like blood through an artery. He was helpless to stop it. The embankment on which he planted his feet was built up of sand and gravel—

it seemed formidable, but was seconds from falling away. The odds were stacked against him.

When he returned to the Fang Estate, he was greeted as usual by the sight of guests waiting to speak with him. Grand Secretary Fang had set aside his pursuit of Daoist transcendence and was personally receiving callers in the front hall. The moment Fang Qin entered, everyone stood and looked at him as one, all with different emotions in their eyes.

Fang Qin felt a prickle of unease. "Father, what's going on?"

Grand Secretary Fang's expression was grim as an overcast sky. "Your godsister was accused of an affront against Her Majesty the empress today. She's been placed under house arrest; not even her family may see her."

Old Madam Fang was a bosom friend of that Lady Zhao who was the emperor's old wet nurse, and had jokingly named her the godmother of Fang Qin's younger brother, the third Young Master Fang. This was a matter that had nothing to do with Fang Qin, but out of a sense of friendly politeness, he referred to Lady Zhao's daughter, who was in service in the imperial palace, as his "godsister" in public.

Fang Qin was shocked. "Why?"

"Why?" Grand Secretary Fang repeated slowly. "Remember—His Majesty called Gu Yun his imperial uncle and treated him as family since childhood, yet one whiff of discord was all it took for him to throw the man in the dungeon. If the Marquis of Order is treated thus, what more need be said of people like us? His Majesty's ruthlessness truly chills the heart."

Mind racing, Fang Qin turned toward an old servant. "Send a message to Duke Zhao. Tell him to cease these petty tricks and rotten ideas. He must quit while he's ahead."

The room exploded in a storm of protest. One of the guests stepped forward to object. "Minister Fang, why do you once again side with outsiders?"

Fang Qin ignored him, fixing his gaze on Grand Secretary Fang. “Father, don’t you see? His Majesty isn’t the late emperor; he won’t tolerate even a hint of dissent. Try to force his hand and you’ll suffer his fury. Our goal is to root out Prince Yan’s faction, is it not? What good is challenging His Majesty?”

He pressed on before Grand Secretary Fang could cut in, his tone as severe as the lines of his face. “I want to protect my brother as well. But if we continue down this road, he won’t be the only casualty. Everyone here is of one mind, so I’ll be frank: do you think Duke Zhao’s wiped his own ass clean? If Prince Yan gets his hands on incriminating evidence and raises a fuss, it’ll become that much more difficult for us to fight back! It’s one railway line. Aside from making Li Min gnash his teeth, what tangible good do we do by blocking its construction? Gu Yun can dispatch troops with a snap of his fingers, long before your would-be foreign affairs envoys can reach the front lines! What more can you do? Cut off supplies to our own soldiers and betray our nation?”

He had been stewing in discontent for too long. When he finally lashed out, he didn’t even spare his father’s dignity. There was a heavy beat of silence before someone finally responded. “Then, does Minister Fang really intend to take this lying down?”

Fang Qin was at a loss. He suddenly realized he would never get through to these people, especially now that Grand Secretary Fang had emerged from retirement to take the lead. Sometimes it wasn’t violent winds and torrential rains that sank a ship—sometimes, the vessel simply reached the end of its natural lifespan. Fang Qin glanced around the room with a final cold sneer and stalked away.

Sitting perfectly upright, Grand Secretary Fang lowered his eyes and stroked a hand over his beard. “My son lacks manners. My apologies, gentlemen.”

An elderly minister, so wizened he could barely crack open his rheumy eyes, spoke up from beside him. “The second young master may be a brilliant talent, but he is still brash with youth.”

Fang Qin could hardly be considered a youth at his age. But Grand Secretary Fang only shook his head ponderously. “It’s as you say. During the reign of Emperor Wu, he was still young. He didn’t experience those turbulent years as we did. I’ve always been of the mind that some things are better kept from the younger generation, if only to spare them the agony of indecision. We who aided the late emperor’s ascension yet remain. If we gather our descendants, we may yet have the strength to accomplish our objective… Still, that unfilial son of mine was right about one thing—tell Duke Zhao to curb his petty tricks. Why expend so much effort for such meager results? Enough with this farce.”

Prince Yan, however, allowed Duke Zhao no such opportunity.

The next day, the Lingshu Institute submitted a memorial announcing that, after rigorous testing, the steam locomotive was ready for operation. They invited the Longan Emperor to inspect the invention with his own two eyes. Li Feng happily brought the crown prince down to the testing grounds and even climbed aboard and rode the steam locomotive for a stretch of track. After returning to the palace and before the novelty had quite faded, he received a memorial from Yao Zhen in Jiangbei asking when the railway would be operational. This only aggravated the Longan Emperor’s existing anxieties.

Come evening, the Censorate delivered the final match that lit his imperial temper aflame by submitting a memorial accusing Duke Zhao of mismanagement, illegal seizure of property, and various other misconduct.

The Canal Commission and the Lingshu Institute, jointly responsible for the steam railway line, promptly added their voices to the stream of excoriations. With so many people adding fuel to the fire, the eruption that followed was inevitable. Amid the chaos, the influence Prince Yan had accumulated over the past several years finally began to make itself felt. He had pried open the pathway to upward mobility that had been clogged since the final years of Emperor Wu's reign. Immediately thereafter, as if on cue, more reports of illegal land occupation in various regions began to crop up one after another, finally dragging this issue that had long plagued the nation out into the spotlight.

More onlookers, eager to fan the flames, stepped forward and requested a full national investigation—Li Feng rejected such an absurd proposal out of hand. Even if he wanted to intimidate the noble families, their dismantlement would have to be carried out step by step, over time. He was loath to bite off more than he could chew.

Unfortunately, Duke Zhao, that imbecile who had stuck his neck out first, was out of luck. He was arrested within a matter of days and went on to implicate a slew of sycophants who relished abusing their power. Bystanders practically scaled the walls to watch as these miscreants were escorted away in chains, their properties confiscated. Within days, the storytellers of Southward Tower had compiled a collection of new tales that became wildly popular with the public.

The crown prince, who had just begun listening in on court assemblies, found himself with a front-row seat to this explosive case. It was quite the learning experience for the lad, who watched the drama unfold in dumbstruck silence. Prince Yan had refrained from expressing his stance throughout most of the proceedings, but as a particular court session drew to a close, he turned to the young prince. "What do you think, Your Highness?" he asked kindly.

Raised under the shelter of Li Feng's protection, the little crown prince had grown up innocent and artless. Li Feng had once ordered him to seek his fourth imperial uncle's guidance, so when Chang Geng asked, the boy regurgitated his young uncle's teachings without thinking. "The philosopher Han Fei once said, 'If a monarch is ignorant of politics, he will be played for a fool; if a subject is unrestrained by law, he will sow chaos.' The stability of the nation depends on its laws. Just as people may be witless or wise, traitorous or true, when it comes to the larger matters of the world, there is right and there is wrong. If the law lacks clarity, crooked individuals and warring factions will overrun the nation, in which case… wouldn't those in power have a hard time dealing with it all?"

His voice had yet to shed the pure tones of childhood. He was like a schoolboy who had been tapped by his teacher to answer a question before the class. Upon finishing his recitation, he looked up hopefully.

Chang Geng offered him a wordless smile, but Li Feng rebuked him with a scowl. "What are you doing, parroting the lines of your schoolbooks? Get back to your studies; you must apply yourself."

The crown prince didn't dare talk back to his father; head drooping, he murmured his assent. But though he'd merely blurted those childish words, his artless speech sounded heavy with meaning to suspicious ears. Those who judged

others by their own measure might regard even a half-grown child to be as shrewd and cunning as themselves, finding hidden knives in every word.

That evening, the eleven-year-old crown prince's speech spread from the palace like wildfire. Unbeknownst to Fang Qin, Grand Secretary Fang gathered up all the ravenous old wolves who had once hoisted the late emperor onto the throne. Together, they pored over every speck of spittle uttered by the crown prince, trying to divine Li Feng's meaning.

"It's been three generations," Grand Secretary Fang said with an ugly sneer. "We are beyond the help of heaven's favor. I'm sure you've all puzzled it out as well. It was His Majesty who ordered the crown prince to sit in on court sessions. And there you have it—he's determined to see us old geezers dead."

"If not for Imperial Uncle Wang's interference at that banquet, our plan might have succeeded—Prince Yan would have been stripped of his title and exiled to some backwater for muddying the imperial bloodline," someone else added. "To think a bastard child who crawled out of some hole in the ground dares to walk all over us like this. Fang-xiong, decisiveness is what's called for now; wavering will lead us to disaster."

Grand Secretary Fang's wrinkles deepened as he surveyed the room. "My friends, if you would all write down your recommendation on your hands."

Decades ago, a group of ambitious conspirators had gathered to reveal the Yuanhe Emperor's name written on each of their palms. Now, though some of their number were dead and buried and others were near to it, these men once again circled round and bared to each other their wizened palms—

"Vacate the throne."

"Vacate the throne."

"Rid the emperor of treacherous ministers and vacate the throne. The eldest imperial prince has no mother."

"During the reign of Emperor Wu," Grand Secretary Fang said, "when Prince Xiao feigned illness while on the road, it was I who learned of his intention to secretly enter the capital. I asked the eldest princess to deploy the Northern Camp to intercept and arrest him for conspiracy against the state. From there, we pushed the late emperor onto the throne—and history, as they say, is written by the victors." His voice was barely audible. "Today, you've all seen how things stand in the capital. As for how to gain the upper hand and who can be trusted, I'm sure many of you had a plan in mind prior to this meeting."

Grand Secretary Fang wasn't the type to act rashly. He knew they wouldn't have the Gu family on their side this time; the Northern Camp was out of their grasp. As for the Imperial Guard, ever since Liu Chongshan's rebellion, the force had undergone major reorganization. Any officers with more than a hundred soldiers under their command were subject to a thorough investigation to verify that they had a clean background and that their military achievements were genuine. The new policies closed several loopholes and split the Imperial Guard into two divisions with supervisory privileges over each other. This both allowed them to check each other's power without interfering in the other's work and acted as a safeguard against any one person co-opting the whole organization and moving against the emperor.

But all things had their advantages and disadvantages. Great Liang's social upper crust was divided between scholarly and military families, and many military officers held inherited titles of nobility. Most of these families had suffered a steady decline, which was why the Yuanhe Emperor had been forced to appoint a stripling youth to lead troops into battle during the Western Campaign. If the descendants of these famed generals living off the faded glory of their ancestors found themselves with no literary or martial achievements of their own, they would do as Liu Chongshan had: use their family's influence to enter the Imperial Guard, spend a few years climbing the ranks and scraping together something approximating meritorious service, then quickly move up in the world. After so many years, these young-master soldiers and the genuine battle-tested troops had cultivated a unique form of coexistence. Both paid each other due respect, and together they sustained a certain level of combat readiness within the Imperial Guard while maintaining a degree of peace.

Unfortunately, in the aftermath of the Imperial Guard's rebellion, Li Feng had upset this balance.

Perhaps the emperor had fancied himself clear-headed when he issued the order. Either way, no one stepped in to remind the furious Li Feng that in following through with these reforms, he was destroying the prospects of the capital city's young masters. All these noble sons had grown up in the lap of luxury—how could they resign themselves to being lowly foot soldiers for the rest of their lives?

The emperor had nothing to fear from offending these young masters. But there was another military force at play in the capital: in the early years of the Great Liang dynasty, when literary arts were neglected in favor of martial prowess, their ancestors had passed down a special privilege: those who had been conferred titles of nobility on the basis of military achievements were permitted to retain private armed forces as a part of their estate's guard. These troops protected their descendants and served as the nation's final line of defense in times of crisis. In fact, back when Liu Chongshan and Lü Chang's faction revolted, Fang Qin had used these very forces to stall the rebels until the Northern Camp's arrival.

Grand Secretary Fang looked around the room. "When Gu Yun reignited the conflict in the East Sea, he also sent reinforcements to the southwest. He only has so many people at his disposal, and as it stands, all have been dispatched to defend our borders. Meanwhile, the Northern Camp cannot enter the capital without an imperial decree. Li Min cares solely for his own fame and reputation; he's a pretentious man who shuns the company of others. Everywhere he goes, he's accompanied by only a handful of old geezers. I've heard he's decent on a horse and can shoot a bow, but really, what's he done besides show off some flashy tricks from atop a watchtower? I doubt that he's capable of more than that; we can eliminate him without much effort. The only question that remains is: shall we take care of him in the shadows or in the light?"

"If I may ask, what constitutes shadow and light?" someone spoke up from beside him.

The grand secretary who had mentored half the imperial court responded with no change in expression: "To carry out our plan in the shadows, we would need a few dozen suicide fighters to ambush Li Min on his way home in the evening after the grand assembly. Then we bury the evidence and wait for things to blow over—His Majesty will have no choice but to let the matter go. To carry out our plan in the light…we would have to remind His Majesty whom his most faithful and loyal

subjects are, show him how they have been protecting his nation all this time, and take it upon ourselves to arrest the treacherous ministers of his court. At that point, the inheritor of the throne would be ours to decide."

"That's… Master Fang, I fear it won't be easy to carry out our plan in the light." The speaker was the son of the Marquis of Pingning, who had once been one of three marquises in the capital. His father had passed away years ago. His son had a generous paunch and found it laborious to walk, so he rarely left the house. Though he looked nothing like the issue of a renowned general, he was an unusually clear-headed individual. "Setting aside the difficulty of avoiding the Imperial Guard and palace sentries, even if we succeed, His Majesty's the type who finds death preferable to dishonor. He'll insist on getting to the bottom of things. The more intractable characters of the Northern Camp are all dead. Their troops won't enter the capital without an imperial decree—but what if His Majesty sends for them in his fury? And we can't discount the sentries within the palace and the Imperial Guard without it. Liu Chongshan and Lü Chang's rebellion raised waves that have yet to subside. I'm afraid we have an uphill battle ahead of us."

"The sentries can't cover every centimeter of the palace grounds. Similarly, there are places the Imperial Guard cannot enter," Grand Secretary Fang said dismissively. "I've heard that in light of the victory in Liangjiang, the bootlickers in the Department of Rites have submitted a memorial requesting His Majesty offer sacrifices to heaven and earth. They intend to make a great show of praying for the fate of the nation to boost morale. There will be plenty of opportunity for us there. As for how to deal with His Majesty's anger…"

He chuckled and lifted slender, drooping eyes. "We'll simply ensure that he has no opportunity to get angry in the first place. Don't tell me you really believe that with Li Min out of the way, His Majesty will let us off the hook? We all heard what the crown prince said in court today. He's but a child—what does he know of this nation's affairs? Who do you think taught him those words? He's eleven years old, yet he's preaching about the unbending nature of law and the importance of stamping out factions. Pointing at the mulberry tree while cursing the locust tree—who can't see what he really means? He came just short of calling us out by name and labeling us enemies of the state. My friends, do you intend to equivocate until the crown prince ascends the throne and gifts all of us a length of white silk with which to hang ourselves?"

Grand Secretary Fang had done away with all subtlety; his words were shocking.

As expected of an old minister personally named Zhuangyuan by the late emperor. Grand Secretary Fang was bold as brass; he had seemed innocuous enough when silent, but the moment he stepped back onto the political stage, he was sure to move mountains. His message was blunt: *If the emperor turns his back on us, we'll do away with the emperor* and, *If the young crown prince won't heed his puppet masters, we'll swap him out for his motherless elder brother.*

Marquis Pingning stared in stupefaction for a long moment before stuttering out another critical issue: "But even then…there's no way Gu Yun will let the matter go."

"The Foreign Affairs Mission has yet to reach the front lines, but everything should be in order." Grand Secretary Fang chuckled softly. "The perilous front lines, the rapacious foreigners who eye our borders, an envoy from the capital—come now, the cast has been assembled and the time is ripe. Don't tell me you've

forgotten what happened twenty years ago?"

A tempest was brewing over the heart of the nation, yet Prince Yan, standing in the eye of the storm, seemed oblivious. He attended court as usual and pressed ahead with his new policies. On this particular day, he was in exceptionally high spirits, having just received a letter from Gu Yun.

Gu Yun had sent this missive directly to the Marquis Estate, a personal letter through and through. When Captain Huo handed it over, he couldn't help but blush at the way Chang Geng's eyes lit up.

"Has he sprouted three heads and six arms or something? What could there possibly be to write about now?" Chang Geng held the envelope to the light, trying to peek into its contents, as he grumbled half-heartedly at Huo Dan. "I'm shocked he has the leisure to send me letters when he's so busy fighting the Westerners. Honestly, what am I to do with that man?"

The Marquis Estate had never had a mistress of the house in the traditional sense. Uncle Huo, ever the steadfast personal guard, had of course noticed hints here and there, but still, it was difficult for him to adjust to these new norms, much less discuss his marshal's personal letters with this "other master" who held such a unique status. As he listened to Prince Yan, he felt as though he had transformed from the captain of the estate guard into a gossipy old woman. He stood there in embarrassment like a blushing doorpost.

It was the first time Gu Yun had sent Chang Geng such a thick letter since the fighting resumed, and Chang Geng didn't quite have the heart to open it just yet. He ran his fingers over the envelope again and again, and even leaned in to sniff the paper with an infatuated expression, as if he could pick up a hint of his faraway lover's scent.

Huo Dan's cheeks were so red that blood was about to seep from his pores. "Y-Your Highness, what…what are you doing?" he stuttered.

Chang Geng glanced at him. Amused by Huo Dan's scarlet cheeks, he couldn't help but tease the man: "You know, I dreamed of my yifu last night. I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't fall back asleep. I truly learned what it means to toss and turn all night, only to receive this letter today. Isn't it a remarkable coincidence?"

At the words *my yifu*, Huo Dan shuddered and pressed his lips shut. *What on earth is the little marquis doing?* he lamented to himself. *This is getting out of hand! The old marquis and eldest princess will be rolling in their graves.*

Hiding a smile, Chang Geng slid a slim knife through the paper to open the envelope when a Linyuan wooden bird burst through the window.

The sudden defection of Liu Zhong, Chang Geng had thought, was rather too good to be true. He had sent two Linyuan Pavilion members south to Liangjiang to investigate, one openly and one in secret. The former had disguised himself as a servant of the Liu family and joined the Foreign Affairs Mission, serving as a point of contact between Liu Zhong and the capital. The latter was a martial arts expert. He followed the Foreign Affairs Mission in the shadows and reported any unusual behavior straight to Chang Geng.

Chang Geng hastily tucked Gu Yun's personal letter into his lapels and opened the wooden bird. As his eyes flicked over the contents, he sneered—some

people really did think of everything.

Chapter 125:
Endgame (Part II)

FAR AWAY IN JIANGBEI, a personal guard caught the wooden bird before it could flap its way into the commander's tent. He fiddled with it, turning it over and over in his hands to no avail. Just as he braced himself to go ask the camp's resident Lingshu scholar, a low voice stopped him.

"I'll take that."

The guard looked up to see Shen Yi approaching and hastily presented the little bird with both hands. Taking it from him, Shen Yi stroked his fingers over its wooden head. The guard blinked in surprise—did General Shen just sigh?

This wooden bird had been attracted by the magnet General Zhong Chan had left behind. Shen Yi padded into the dimly lit commander's tent with the bird in hand. Army medics filed in and out without a word, and a pungent medicinal stench mixed with the lingering copper of blood assaulted his nose.

Yao Zhen turned toward Shen Yi with a grave expression.

During the naval battle a few days ago, while stalling for time, Gu Yun's flagship had been struck by enemy fire. The vessel had disintegrated on the spot as its gold tanks exploded in a brilliant display of pyrotechnics. Even without use of his sight and hearing, Gu Yun had reacted quickly; the instant he felt the impact, he ordered his men to abandon ship and dive into the water. It was thanks to this that he hadn't been a burnt corpse when the armored hawks fished him from the river.

The Far Westerners' ocean-going supply line was broken, and Gu Yun had dispatched troops to seize control of the upper reaches of the Nei River before the recent naval battle. With both supply routes severed, the enemy had no choice but to retreat into Dongying waters.

If not for the severity of their commander in chief's injuries, this battle would have gone down in history as a flawless victory.

This time, Gu Yun had prepared all the battle reports and personal letters in advance. His precarious state was thus concealed from outsiders and insiders alike; even within the Liangjiang Garrison, few knew the extent of his wounds. Aside from a handful of senior officers, personal guards, field doctors, and the armored hawks that had dragged him from the water, the news had been effectively suppressed.

One could imagine the amount of pressure Shen Yi and Yao Zhen found themselves under.

"How is he?" Shen Yi asked.

"You came at the right time; he's awake," Yao Zhen said, his voice low. "Thank goodness Marshal Gu had the foresight to bring you here, Jiping-xiong. Otherwise, it really would have been like the sky had fallen."

Shen Yi grimaced. "Hardly. You'll grow accustomed to this stuff soon enough… Go get some rest; I need to speak to him."

Yao Zhen nodded and dismissed the field doctors from the tent before stepping out himself. Shen Yi tiptoed over and picked up Gu Yun's hand, dangling limply over the side of the bed. The bed's hanging screen had been lowered as people bustled in and out of the commander's tent, but Gu Yun was ignorant to it all. Only when he felt windslasher-calloused fingers against his palm did he realize his visitor was Shen Yi.

Gu Yun was a mess of wounds, with hardly an intact patch of skin on him. Steel panels fixed his entire body in place so that he couldn't even turn his head. He had managed to drift into a deep sleep only to wake again from the pain, and the moment he opened his eyes, his forehead was drenched in cold sweat. But whether his eyes were open or closed, there was no focus in them. The field doctors had explained that explosions could easily damage one's eyes and ears, and to make matters worse, Gu Yun had been subjected to multiple blasts. It was the best he could do to perceive light and shadow. Never mind his glass monocle—even if he strapped a field scope to his face, it would have been no use.

No one could say whether his vision would recover. *Will I really be blind forever?* Gu Yun wondered in silence.

Shen Yi's eyes stung when he saw Gu Yun's vacant gaze. "There's a letter from the Linyuan Pavilion," he wrote into Gu Yun's palm.

Gu Yun blinked once.

Shen Yi opened the wooden bird again to convey its contents to Gu Yun, but as he swept his eyes over the letter inside, he stiffened. After waiting some moments, Gu Yun tapped the back of Shen Yi's hand in confusion.

Shen Yi was an easygoing man. Aside from his half-hearted barking at Gu Yun during their squabbles, it was rare for him to truly lose his temper. But now, as he sat still as stone beside Gu Yun's bed, his hand holding the wooden bird shook. He drew in several harsh breaths as, with a sharp *crunch*, he crushed the little creature's neck in his grip.

What the hell is this? Shen Yi raged to himself. *What the hell* is *this?! Who are we sparing no effort and risking our lives for? What's the fucking point?*

Fearing some new trouble had arisen, Gu Yun couldn't afford to dwell on his unseeing eyes. He forced his mouth open: "What…*cough*…"

His throat had been nicked by a piece of shrapnel that had narrowly missed his carotid artery. The wound overlapped neatly with the old scar that twisted over his neck, and although he wouldn't become mute like Liao Ran, speaking was a struggle, his words wheezing out of him like a broken bellows. That bellows creaked out, "Is the imperial court still determined to sue for peace?"

Shen Yi's eyes were bloodshot. "The Linyuan Pavilion has sent a specialist to monitor the Foreign Affairs Mission," he wrote into Gu Yun's palm. "They've discovered that a portion of the group is in secret contact with the Westerners. It seems a number of individuals whose identities cannot be verified have infiltrated the diplomatic mission."

Gu Yun breathed a sigh of relief. He struggled to shift his neck against the rigid steel plates. "And here I thought something terrible had happened… Didn't they send us a list of everyone taking part in this expedition? Why would they suddenly add people to the group? If it's as you say, we can bar them from entering the garrison. Easy enough."

“We’ve just reported a major victory. There’s no good reason for the Foreign Affairs Mission to come to the front lines at all,” Shen Yi said. “According to the letter, the delegation stopped in Pengcheng to await further instruction from His Majesty. Li Feng said it would be a pity for them to come all this way for nothing, so he ordered them to rest up in the city. When the court finishes allocating the latest round of military funding, the Foreign Affairs Mission is to escort the supply convoy down to the front lines and…”

Gu Yun raised a slender brow. Shen Yi paused in agonized silence before writing into his palm, stroke by stroke. “Reward the troops for their service.”

These words were practically taboo among veterans of the Black Iron Battalion. Gu Yun visibly flinched before the steel panels lashed to his body forced him to stillness. Cold sweat slid down his temples.

“Zixi!” Shen Yi hurried to grab him.

A coppery tang tore through the thick scent of medicine like a bright splash of color as red blood seeped through the bandages wrapped around Gu Yun’s chest. His complexion seemed to pale by comparison. He gave the impression that he was slowly evaporating into thin air, yet he stubbornly clung to consciousness.

Despite everything, he was still trying to maintain his stoic façade in front of others.

What was the use of glory and fame achieved by risking life and limb? Even if a hero’s accomplishments were immortalized in history, he himself would amount to nothing more than a solitary name inscribed on a memorial tablet.

Perhaps future generations of nobility would remember his deeds and cast him as the hero in a morality tale, or perhaps they would denounce him to display their own cynical erudition. As for the common people, they might memorialize him by spinning up fictitious scandals from hearsay or rearranging the rushed plot of his life so that he haphazardly eloped some hundred times with every last one of his female acquaintances—no doubt his only luck with women would be in death.

“I’ll write to Miss Chen immediately.” Shen Yi was incandescent with anger. “I—I…I’ll escort you home; we can resign our posts together. You may as well kidnap His Highness while we’re at it. Taking time to recover from your wounds or treating your illness—you can do whatever you want. To hell with the Li family! I…”

Gu Yun sighed and weakly squeezed his hand.

Shen Yi’s breathing was so ragged he could hardly speak. Unseen by Gu Yun, his face was twisted in misery, but he didn’t dare sob or gasp, lest Gu Yun notice his trembling. He could only take shallow breaths through his mouth and let his tears drip helplessly onto his steel armor.

But how could Gu Yun not notice? He didn’t expose Shen Yi, but merely patted him lightly on the hand. “It’s no big deal,” he said softly. “You don’t need to get so angry… Is there any news from Chang Geng?”

“Yes,” Shen Yi wrote into Gu Yun’s palm with shaking fingers. “His Highness said you oughtn’t worry about anything but the war, and to feel at liberty to slaughter any miscreant who comes to make trouble. He says even if the sky collapses over the capital, he’ll be there to hold up the pieces.”

Gu Yun laughed, the sound thinned by weakness. Blood loss had made him lightheaded; he had to pull all his focus into unraveling the main thread of this new development. “The war…hasn’t yet been won, and they’re already trying to bump me off…” He coughed again weakly. “Looks like there really has been a changing of the guard in the capital. Someone’s resorted to desperate measures—but we’re bound to meet the Westerners in battle at least once more. I can’t leave the front lines now, so I can’t offer him much assistance… Listen here: let the Foreign Affairs Mission into the garrison, then arrest them. Keep them under strict watch and cut off their communication with the capital. If the Westerners really are… *cough*…part of this plot…we can still turn their little trick against them…”

Shen Yi was silent.

“…Jiping?”

“Do you really think it’s worth it?”

Gu Yun started in surprise.

Shen Yi flicked his gaze over the bloodstains on his marshal’s chest before leaning closer to deliver his speech directly into Gu Yun’s deaf ears, every word deliberate. “You’re in here planning for the inevitable next clash with the Westerners while they’re out there plotting your downfall. Do you think it’s worth it?”

Of course Gu Yun’s heart wasn’t free of resentment—how could it be? But he had the misfortune of being accompanied by the short-fused Shen Yi. When they were together, no matter how either of them truly felt, one had to keep a cool head while the other flew off the handle. Shen Yi had nabbed the latter role, so Gu Yun had no choice but to calmly accept the former.

“Well, was that lousy hair ornament you bought Miss Chen for five taels of silver worth it?” Gu Yun asked, his voice low. “You knew you were getting ripped off, but you still went ahead and bought it.”

“It’s only right that I lower myself a little for the sake of the woman I love!” Shen Yi snapped. “Why should I be embarrassed? But you—who are you debasing yourself for?”

Gu Yun took his sweet time responding. “They say even the most filial child struggles when faced with the prolonged illness of a parent. I’ve not even been ill that long—unfilial bastard, you’ve learned to talk back to your betters, I see.”

Shen Yi was speechless. He’d served in the military with this man half his life. As many as the countless times Gu Yun had considered quitting the army, so too were the times Shen Yi swore he’d never worry about this bastard again. He shook off Gu Yun’s hand and rose to leave. *Die then,* he thought.

“Jiping!”

Gu Yun clawed fruitlessly at the air, missing his target. His fingers were covered in so many bandages and poultices they seemed nearly deformed, making it impossible for him to close his fist. This small movement exposed the clammy, scarred skin beneath those dreary bandages, and Shen Yi’s heart lurched with discomfort. His white-hot anger dissipated in a puff of steam.

“Stop moving around!” Shen Yi snapped.

“These next few days… Dongying is sure to send an envoy to negotiate with us in secret,” Gu Yun said, his voice faint. “Chongze is a civil official, so I need you

to…”

Shen Yi felt a spike of distress. “Enough, enough; I understand.”

Rather than lose his temper at being talked over, Gu Yun burst into laughter. After wheezing a while, he said, “If I safeguard home and country and become the most famous general of my generation, the common people will worship me as a god and build temples in my name for centuries to come. Subsisting on incense smoke—now there’s a good life.”

Shen Yi scoffed. “What kind of god would you even be? We already have door gods—don’t tell me you want to be a window god? Or perhaps a bed god?”

“I’ll be whatever they like,” Gu Yun said with a chuckle. “It doesn’t matter which temple people go to…to pray, the things they ask for are all the same… Like uhh…to be promoted and get rich, or to be blessed with a good marriage…and a brood of kids.”

Shen Yi blinked—riches, marriage, and children? Wasn’t that the work of swindlers, matchmakers, and Guanyin Bodhisattva? Torn between grief and indignation, he couldn’t stand this man’s company for another moment.

“O Great Immortal Shen,” Gu Yun murmured, his voice thin as gossamer, “please hand me the flute in the box on my nightstand.”

Sighing, Shen Yi picked up the little box from its place of honor beside Gu Yun’s pillow. Within lay a white jade flute, glowing with a subtle luster, atop a thick stack of billow paper. Beside it was a small collection of windslashers inscribed with different names. The box seemed to contain all Gu Yun’s sentimental artifacts.

I won’t die, Gu Yun thought firmly to himself as he grasped the cold jade of the flute. *If they didn’t manage to blow me up on that ship, then I won’t die. Chang Geng hasn’t been cured of the wu’ergu, and there are so many people in the capital who want to hurt him, there’s no way I could…*

Could what? Before he could finish the thought, he tumbled once again into exhausted sleep.

Thousands of kilometers away, the lamps still burned within the Fang Estate deep in the night.

Fang Qin sat in his room, his face grim as stagnant water. After a lengthy silence, he lifted his head and asked, “You’re certain? You heard this with your own ears?”

The servant boy kneeling before him couldn’t seem to stop trembling as he nodded rapidly.

The current head of the Fang family lifted a hand to cover his face, his shoulders shaking. For a moment, it was difficult to tell whether he was laughing or crying. Fang Qin had once orchestrated a plot to lead Lü Chang down this very road. He had toyed with the thought that the ambitious Prince Yan might someday pursue this path as well. He had never imagined his own father would take to it first.

The first time every scholar read the four doctrines of the philosopher Hengqu-xiansheng[4] in their youth—serve as a conscience for heaven and earth, impart to the people correct ways of living, continue the imperiled scholarship of ancient sages, and establish an age of eternal peace—all felt passionately compelled

to become an unparalleled statesman of their generation, one who would carry their nation for millennia on the strength of their accomplishments. But in the end, such passion was inevitably worn away by the temptations of rank, fame, and fortune, by the treacherous ways of the world and the simple passage of time. Those bright-eyed young scholars would spend the rest of their lives spinning their wheels as they went through the same, stereotypical motions…

History was filled with exceptional talents, but how many of them could be considered true statesmen?

Fang Qin spent the rest of the night sitting listless in his study. The next morning, he instructed his most trusted servants to escort his wife and children quietly out of the capital. When the first rooster had crowed during the fourth night watch, for a moment, Fang Qin thought he would rush over to the Marquis Estate, drag Prince Yan out of bed, and confess everything about the coup that was about to shake the capital. Yet despite staging this scene in his mind several hundred times as he waited for dawn, in the end, he couldn't do it.

How difficult it was to be both the loyal subject and the filial son. It seemed he would never live to become a great and loyal statesman; in that case, he could only devote himself to the pursuit of the latter.

Five days later, a tantalizing rumor spread like wildfire through the capital and straight into the ears of every power-hungry conspirator. It seemed that, just a few days after the diplomatic-mission-

turned-supply-escort arrived at the Liangjiang Garrison, the entire camp had suddenly and inexplicably been placed under lockdown—Marshal Gu's status was unknown.

Grand Secretary Fang, privy to slightly more detail, received a letter from one of his students containing a few simple strokes: *It is done.*

He exhaled slowly, his heart filling with indescribable excitement. To think things would go so smoothly. The greedy Westerners had helped him tremendously, and now, with the nation's military power out of the way, he could finally set in motion his glorious plans for a noble hegemony.

At the same time, the Ministry of Rites suggested that the emperor make sacrifices to heaven, just as they had anticipated. Fang Qin took the lead in endorsing the proposal, and with Prince Yan's faction voicing no objection, the motion to indulge in this rare extravagance passed with unanimous support.

During the years of the Yuanhe era, the late emperor offered sacrifices often. The practice had fallen to the wayside thanks to the Longan Emperor's more frugal tendencies, but the logistical infrastructure still stood at the ready. To ensure they didn't ruffle any feathers while buttering Li Feng up, the Ministry of Rites had long begun preparing in secret. The moment the emperor gave the nod, they set to work without a moment's delay.

When the day finally arrived, envoys from the northwest came to pay tribute one after another as fireworks dyed the sky in bright colors over the nine gates. The restrictions on festivities had been lifted for the occasion, and the clamor of bells and drums filled the capital in a lively scene.

The emperor was to leave the palace to make sacrifices to heaven as well as report to his ancestors his achievements over the past year. Having learned his

lesson during his last disastrous Longevity Festival, Li Feng left the unreliable civil and military officials of the court behind and brought along only the crown prince and thirteen palace sentries. Prince Yan and the Grand Council led the rest of the courtiers to the base of the altar.

After sacrificing to heaven and earth, paying respects to his ancestors, and performing a number of other meticulous rituals without mishap, Li Feng breathed a sigh of relief—he could finally dispel the unfortunate shadows cast by his previous outing. He ordered a return to the palace, with the imperial palanquin taking the lead.

It was as palace sentries stepped up to replace the Imperial Guard outside the Imperial City that the cry went up from the crowd.

"Assassins—!"

The word was still ringing when a handful of Dongying shuriken sliced through the air. The little blades whipped through the crowd of officials, barely missing the sleeves of a Hanlin scholar, to embed themselves in a coldly gleaming row in the dirt. The elderly scholar's eyes rolled back into his head, and he collapsed in a dead faint.

The interior and exterior troops of the Imperial City reacted as one. Some yelled, "Protect His Majesty!" while others shouted, "Apprehend the assassins!"

Everyone stood aghast as an imperial guard turned and lunged toward the crown prince, blade held high. Chang Geng, being closest, dashed forward to grab the boy by his belt and drag him back.

From amid the chaos came another shout: "The Imperial Guard is rebelling!"

The leader of the emperor's protective escort on this outing happened to be the captain of the Imperial Guard himself. Flabbergasted, he exclaimed, "Like hell we are!"

Another man in a palace sentry's uniform pulled a miniature crossbow from his lapels and fired on Li Feng, who nearly fell out of his palanquin. The captain of the Imperial Guard thought to himself, *The palace sentries are the ones who are rebelling, but they're trying to use us as a scapegoat! Preposterous!*

"Rebels have infiltrated the palace sentries—they're trying to assassinate His Majesty! Arrest them!"

The Imperial Guard had been split into two divisions as a way to check each other's power, but communication between them was poor, and they now saw each other more as rivals than comrades. One group was primarily responsible for guarding the emperor's person, while the other was expected to support them and oversee the operation. The latter was obviously at a disadvantage: they did the same amount of work but had no opportunity to display their skills before His Majesty. It was a recipe for dissatisfaction.

The primary guard believed there were assassins hidden among the palace sentries, while the support guard suspected the primary guard of malicious intent. As for the palace sentries, they thought the Imperial Guard as a whole had risen in rebellion. The three parties descended into chaos. Gu Yun had transferred nearly all the competent military leaders in the capital to various garrisons throughout the country, leaving behind only spineless cowards and dangerous conspirators to watch over the court. The area was quickly swallowed by pandemonium.

Fang Qin's faction had been waiting for their cue. They swarmed Li Feng in a disorganized mob. "It's too dangerous here—Your Majesty, you must go!"

A group of unfamiliar guards followed in their wake. Fang Qin cried, "Your Majesty, please step down from your palanquin! We will protect Your Majesty with our lives!"

In his panic, Li Feng failed to notice any odd details. He grabbed Fang Qin's arm. "Where is the crown prince?"

Fang Qin shot a look at one of the guards. "The crown prince's guards will keep him safe. Prince Yan was standing near him just a moment ago, but we were separated in the crowd. Your Majesty, please get to safety first. This subject will send someone to find him."

Furious, Li Feng barked, "Summon the Northern Camp! These unruly traitors…"

With a sharp nod, Fang Qin dispatched one of his men to go through the motions of relaying the imperial decree. They had planned this, too, in advance; their success depended on quickly isolating the emperor from the palace sentries and the Northern Camp. As Fang Qin coaxed and urged Li Feng along, their own men, in palace sentries' uniforms, rushed forward as one. It took but a moment of distraction; by the time Li Feng realized what had happened, it was too late.

On the front lines, the pope received a report: their spies in the Foreign Affairs Mission reported that Great Liang's emperor had been overthrown. The supply convoy sent to the Liangjiang Garrison was headed by a group of assassins who had reenacted the treacherous attack on the Black Iron Battalion in the northwest some twenty years ago. Gu Yun had suffered severe injuries—the man might very well be dead. The Liangjiang Garrison had suppressed the news, but the camp was in chaos. It was the perfect opportunity for the Westerners to launch a counteroffensive.

In the past, the pope would never have believed this type of intelligence so easily—at the very least, he would have dispatched someone to verify the information—but he was running out of time.

Great Liang's navy had broken two critical lines of communication with the Westerners' home nation, and while the conflict between rival factions within the Holy Empire was nearing its climax, a wave of rebellion had engulfed their formerly docile South Sea colonies. With so many fires springing up around them, the Western navy had no choice but to take a long detour east through the Dongying archipelago.

Truth be told, the pope didn't trust the Dongying people as far as he could throw them; he had always felt they were like a pack of wild dogs liable to tear out their ally's throats the moment their back was turned. No one knew better than he that the Westerners' naval supremacy depended on an abundance of fuel. Without the large quantities of violet gold their ships required, the Western navy was little more than a flotilla of scrap metal.

As for Mister Ja, he had unveiled a flawless new plan with great fanfare and dispatched an envoy to the shogunate in Dongying to ask for their cooperation.

After welcoming their Western visitor with a round of sycophantic flattery, the shogun agreed to his request. He politely saw off his guest before returning to his residence and firmly shutting the door.

No sooner had it closed than a travel-worn Dongying samurai slipped in through the rear entrance. He removed his jingasa and reported in a low voice, “I met with Marshal Gu.”

“Is he alive then? Wounded?” asked the shogun.

“I cannot be certain. I saw him only briefly and my status was too low to speak to him directly. But the garrison seemed well organized and packed with artillery. There was no evidence of disorder; if anything, they seemed ready to fight at a moment’s notice. I saw no team of assassins either. If anyone truly made such an attempt, perhaps they’ve already been arrested in secret.”

“I understand. Good work.”

Chapter 126:
Endgame (Part III)

THE LITTLE CROWN PRINCE'S soul nearly fled his body in terror as all hell broke loose around him. Disoriented, he clung desperately to Chang Geng's hand. The officials of the imperial court scattered as the two forces clashed, leaving the imperial palanquin collapsed in a heap on the ground. With the rabble out of the way, the miscreants narrowed in on their true target, launching toward Chang Geng and the crown prince.

Minister Fang had instructed them thus: "Eliminate Prince Yan at all costs. If the opportunity presents itself, finish off the crown prince too."

The assassins were pleased to find their targets clustered together, as though their prey had gone out of their way to make things easy.

An arrow narrowly missed the top of the crown prince's head. Chang Geng grabbed the boy's scruff, like a puppy, and dragged him back. The child was so terrified he couldn't even cry out; he sobbed in wordless silence.

Suddenly he felt a hand wiping the tear tracks from his face. The crown prince looked up through misty eyes to see his fourth imperial uncle drying his tears. A moment later, Chang Geng lifted his hand to reveal a black-iron cuff—a silk dart sprang from his sleeve, slicing through an assassin's wrist with ease. Chang Geng seized their would-be assailant's sword and, with a twist of his wrist and the screech of metal on metal, carved out a bloody path of escape.

"When I was Your Highness's age, I found myself surrounded by a pack of ravenous wolves outside the Great Northern Pass," Chang Geng said, his voice steady. "The land was covered in ice and snow, with not a soul in sight. The only thing I had on me was a little knife we country kids used as a toy. And the wolves chasing me weren't ordinary beasts either. They had been raised by barbarians for the sole purpose of hunting and killing humans. They were huge, even taller than me when standing."

If there was one thing his enemies and allies could agree on, it was that Prince Yan was handsome of face and graceful of bearing. He wasn't ostentatious, the way most noble young masters who grew up in the capital were, nor was he spare like an impoverished scholar or rough-hewn like a decorated military veteran. He was exceptionally serene, but in a different way from Great Master Liao Ran, whose placidity conjured images of a gently glowing oil lamp beneath the shadow of a Buddha. Rather, Prince Yan resembled the statue of a demonic fiend that stood inside a temple—cloaked in a desolate layer of incense ash, yet inspiring cold fear. Many had tried to imitate Prince Yan's calm and measured manner of speech over the years; none would have dreamed of associating him with a pack of starving wolves in the frontier lands north of the Great Wall.

The little crown prince was stunned.

A pair of assassins charged toward them. One hacked at the little crown prince in Chang Geng's arms while the other blocked his retreat.

Chang Geng sneered. He had grown up fighting the iron puppets of the Marquis Estate—what did he have to fear from opponents of this caliber?

With a sweep of his sword, Chang Geng deflected the first assassin's blade. His opponent staggered as his weapon flew from his grip. He lifted his empty hands in a fruitless attempt to defend himself and was sliced neatly in two on the blade of Prince Yan's sword. Chang Geng didn't pause; he darted three steps forward and, turning, used his momentum to fling his blade straight at the second assailant. Terrified, the man scrambled back, slamming into the sharp point of an incoming imperial guard's spear.

The little crown prince had never seen the imperial cook kill a chicken, never mind the death of a man. Horrified, he flinched his eyes shut—but he couldn't stop the sickly-sweet stench of blood from assaulting his nose, setting his stomach roiling with nausea. "Fourth Uncle…" he sniffled.

"Don't be afraid," Chang Geng said mildly. "The capable fighters are all either standing guard on our front lines or have already given their lives on the battlefield. As for these craven cowards, none have the ability to ride into battle and slaughter their enemies. The only thing they're good for is scaring children—are you still a child?"

But…I am *a child*, the crown prince thought, forlorn.

Chang Geng seemed to sense his thoughts, his mouth curving faintly. *Yes, you're still a child*, he thought, *but not for long.*

The spear-toting imperial guard who had dispatched the assassin called to them, "Your Highnesses, please follow me!"

The little crown prince turned to follow on instinct. Chang Geng hooked his scabbard into the back of the boy's collar and yanked him aside. Before the crown prince could right himself, he was struck in the face by a splatter of hot blood. The man who had called out to them was cleaved in half as a heavy armor unit burst onto the scene—

Elsewhere, Li Feng had finally realized he wasn't being escorted back to the palace, but was being led like a hostage toward a deserted area. His heart thudded in his chest as an inconceivable thought rose in him. He whipped his head around and demanded, "What is going on? Dear subject Fang, where are you taking us?"

Fang Qin did not pause in his footsteps, nor did he bow or kneel. In a ringing voice, he said, "Your Majesty, this subject would like to submit a memorial to the throne."

Li Feng stared in disbelief. "What did you say? Stop—we said stop!"

The pair of fake palace sentries flanking him paid him no mind as they grabbed him and dragged him along.

"This subject wishes to impeach the only prince of the first rank of our nation, Prince Yan, Li Min," Fang Qin continued. "He has colluded with unscrupulous profiteers and used his war beacon tickets as pretext to shamelessly buy and sell official posts—this is his first crime. Despite being the son of His Majesty the Yuanhe Emperor, he lacks filial piety and has shown no devotion to his late imperial father. Instead, to exert influence over our military, he spends his nights in the Marquis Estate and continues to call Marshal Gu his godfather even after coming of age and receiving his princely title. He harbors nefarious intent and esteems neither father nor sovereign. This is his second crime…"

Li Feng would have had to be concussed to misunderstand what was going on. He exploded, “Fang Qin, what is the meaning of this?!”

Fang Qin’s voice rose above his shouts: “Your Majesty, there are countless men waiting to ambush the conniving traitor. Though my allies and I are unskilled, we are willing to follow in the footsteps of the ancient sages—if the treacherous ministers cannot be checked, then they will be slain to free Your Majesty of their influence—

to this I swear!”

His henchmen took up the cry: “Slay treacherous ministers! Free His Majesty of their influence!”

Li Feng was aghast. Looking around, all he saw were unfamiliar faces. The fake palace sentries, clad in stolen armor, watched him like tigers eyeing their prey, and the usual faces of his court looked to him like strangers. They were green-skinned, sharp-fanged demons in human skin, ready to swarm him in the next instant.

So this was the bond between sovereign and subject.

Was this how it was during the reign of Emperor Wu?

Was this how it was during the reign of the Yuanhe Emperor?

Perhaps he didn’t hold a candle to the trailblazing Emperor Wu, but did he fall short of even his father, whom he had always, in his most private thoughts, found wanting? It was impossible for him to accept this as truth. Yet no matter how unacceptable it was, it seemed to be so. After all, the Yuanhe Emperor never suffered a siege on his capital, nor had wave after wave of rebels tried to claw him from the imperial throne.

Li Feng had no time to register anger or fear. He felt as if he had been struck across the face without warning. In the three thousand days since his ascension, he had yet to enjoy one peaceful night’s sleep. And despite spending his every waking moment bustling about, what had he accomplished? In the end, he was no greater than the cowardly late emperor, who had spent his days neck-deep in women, lamenting each turn of the seasons.

There was nothing he could do; his confidence splintered away bit by bit, scattering like dust in the wind beneath the pitiless eyes of the rebel army.

“How…” Li Feng shook from head to toe. “How *dare* you!”

Fang Qin bowed his head, avoiding Li Feng’s gaze. At this point, he knew he could no longer pretend to be a loyal minister. “Please forgive me, Your Majesty. But Li Min deceives the masses, flouts the law, and defies the will of our ancestors. Out of concern for the state of our nation, we are compelled to resort to this imperfect plan, for which we deserve to die a thousand deaths. With Prince Yan’s demise, the treasonous members of his faction running rampant in all corners of the nation will surely rise up. Please make your decision with haste and investigate this matter thoroughly, Your Majesty.”

Li Feng gnashed his teeth. “You dare *threaten* us?”

Fang Qin sank to his knees, unfazed. “This lowly subject dares not. This lowly subject knows Your Majesty has suffered a great shock, and your mind is in a state of turmoil. The imperial edict has been drafted—you need only review it, Your Majesty.”

Someone presented the imperial edict to Li Feng with both hands. Sure enough, the document laid out a thorough analysis of Prince Yan's alleged crimes; all it lacked was the imperial jade seal.

Shaking off the sentries gripping his arms, Li Feng lurched forward and grabbed the collar of the man holding the imperial edict, giving him a vicious shove. In his rage, he completely forgot about his weakened leg, which had never seen full recovery. He lost his footing and collapsed in a heap, failing to move the rebel even a jot.

Under the watchful eyes of the heavens, he stood surrounded by his people, the people of Great Liang, yet no one stepped forward to help him. The real noble elites and false palace sentries looked on with cool eyes as the furious Son of Heaven toppled and fell flat on his rear.

Someone in a palace guard's uniform—another imposter no doubt—jogged over. He glanced at Li Feng before turning to Fang Qin. "My lord, the traitors have been executed!"

Li Feng's knees turned to water. He sat on the ground, legs akimbo, and gritted from between clenched teeth, "And the crown prince?"

The imposter looked to Fang Qin. Only after noting his subtle nod did the guard cautiously say, "The crown prince… The crown prince was ambushed by assassins and uhh… My condolences, Your Majesty."

Li Feng's world seemed to flash white. An icy chill pierced his heart; by the time he regained his senses, he had choked up a mouthful of blood. Li Feng sat on the ground and stared at the thick black blood dripping from his fingers. *How have we fallen so far?* he wondered in a daze.

Hesitation flickered over Fang Qin's face. Still on his knees, he instinctively reached out to help Li Feng up only to pause with his hand outstretched. He retracted it, reluctance receding from his expression like the tide. When he spoke next, his voice was icy. "Your Majesty has multiple sons. If the third prince is too young, there is the eldest prince, who is diligent, intelligent, and kind. For the sake of the nation, please calm yourself and recognize the most important matter at hand!"

He grabbed the imperial edict from his underling and shoved it in front of Li Feng once more. "Please, Your Majesty!"

Li Feng knocked the fake imperial edict aside. "Not on your life!"

Fang Qin silently rubbed at his cheek, where the edict had left a mark as it whipped past. He leaned forward and sighed. "Your Majesty," he began gently, "you are at our mercy. Even if there were hundreds of soldiers outside the city walls—even if the Northern Camp comes—who would dare approach? Whether you will it or no, this imperial decree will be signed today. And what's wrong with the eldest prince? This subject hears that he is studious and reserved in temperament, the paragon of an imperial scion. He's no bastard of unknown origins like Prince Yan. He's a much more suitable representative of the Great Liang imperial family, don't you agree?"

Pain lanced through Li Feng's chest. He felt frozen to the core, as though he had plunged into a lake of ice. He sucked in several sharp breaths, then sneered. "And what comes after? Surely our dear subjects won't wait for us to settle accounts come autumn. What do you intend to do with us? Place us under house

arrest? Or perhaps you'll execute us and be done with it? The empress is frail and stays out of matters of state, and the eldest prince's entire maternal family was sentenced to death. He has no one to rely on, so he's the perfect puppet for you… You've certainly concocted the perfect plan!"

Fang Qin shook his head. "Your Majesty, the crown prince has unfortunately departed this life. The traitor Li Min has also been executed… Of course, if you're willing, you could abdicate in the third prince's favor instead. But the third prince is so young—he hasn't even begun his schooling. Would you not be making a mockery of this nation passed down by your ancestors?"

Never would Fang Qin have imagined he would one day have the gall to speak to the emperor like this. The Confucian code of ethics imposed thousands of different rules on a person, all of which seemed unbreakable. But in reality, these commandments were not so strong as all that. Transgress their bounds just once, let go of one's sense of shame and honor, and the sky, it seemed, was the limit.

The ground began to quake, pulling him back to the present. Everyone tensed—these were the orderly footsteps of a well-trained army, and judging from the tremors, there were heavy armor units among their number.

Had the Northern Camp arrived?

Fang Qin's heart tripped in his chest. This was a departure from their plan—something had gone wrong. Making a snap decision, he waved his minions forward to seize Li Feng once again. "I'm afraid I must ask Your Majesty to bear this insult and accompany us on a brief excursion."

Fake palace sentries surrounded Li Feng on all sides, forcing him along as they retreated from those pounding footsteps. Yet the moment they turned a corner, the imposter leading the way came to an abrupt stop—a group of real palace sentries waited up ahead.

How did they manage to slip away from the crowd?

No…even if it happened sooner than expected, it was not surprising. The moment news of the attack reached the palace, the sentries would have turned out in full force. The more immediate question was, how had they so quickly found Li Feng?

Fang Qin whipped his head around and scanned the group beside him. The scout who had come to report Prince Yan and the crown prince's deaths had disappeared.

There was a traitor in their midst.

More footsteps sounded from the direction they'd come. When he turned, he found that what had forced them into panicked flight wasn't heavy armor at all, but a team of iron puppets pressed into service from some nobleman's estate.

Fang Qin was drenched in cold sweat. He knew at once that they had fallen into someone else's trap. But at this point, he no longer had the luxury of careful analysis. He grabbed Li Feng and pressed his blade to the emperor's fragile throat. "Who dares take another step forward?!"

The emperor was precious cargo; no one wanted to accidentally commit regicide. The palace sentries froze in place.

Fang Qin gulped air through a dry throat, stunned by his own audacity. Not in his wildest dreams had he imagined himself capable of such disgraceful behavior.

But before the sludge that was his mind could conjure up a countermeasure, the tardy Imperial Guard finally arrived on the scene in a ragged mob. In the same instant, the shriek of a hawk echoed from beyond the nine gates—the Northern Camp's armored hawks were requesting entrance into the aerial defense field.

A dull thud sounded beside him. One of his co-conspirators had fallen to his knees in terror.

Fang Qin gritted his teeth and turned to the Longan Emperor. "Please order them to stand down, Your Majesty."

Battered and bruised as he was, Li Feng still managed a sneer. "Never."

An arrow, shot from behind, grazed Fang Qin's shoulder. It was merely a scratch, but the searing pain of splitting skin made him flinch. The delicate balance shattered.

Seizing his opportunity, Li Feng shoved Fang Qin away and broke into a run.

But he was once again hobbled by his injury. The moment Li Feng stepped away, his leg gave out. He stumbled forward, flailing, and Fang Qin gave chase, instinctively thrusting his sword forward—

Li Feng jerked violently, like a dying fish gasping on the shore.

Face pale, Fang Qin let the hilt slip from his grip and staggered back, staring at the blade protruding from between Li Feng's shoulder blades as if seeing a ghost.

The palace sentries who had refrained from shooting for fear of harming the emperor exploded into action.

A child's tearful cry cut through the shouts of treacherous ministers. Li Feng struggled to lift his head and saw the little crown prince rushing toward him. Not far behind him was Prince Yan, not a hair out of place. His younger brother met his eyes and slowed to a stop, gazing down at the miserable emperor in that uniquely calm way of his, his hands clasped behind his back.

The palace sentries and Imperial Guard hurtled over in a noisy tangle and made quick work of the dazed courtiers who had risen in revolt. Li Feng was carried out of the crowd as the captain of the palace sentries wept and wailed before running off to summon the imperial physicians. Everyone knew in their hearts that it would be of no use.

Stricken, the little crown prince laid his head against his father's chest and sobbed.

Li Feng wanted badly to reach out and touch his tender young son. But before he could muster the strength, a hand landed on the crown prince's shoulder. Prince Yan stood silently at his side, stroking the boy's back to comfort him. In the eyes of outsiders, it seemed like a heartwarming scene of an uncle and nephew in mourning. Only Li Feng understood the threat concealed in Prince Yan's gesture.

Li Feng stared fiercely into Prince Yan's tranquil eyes and recalled the rancorous words of his short-lived mother. *All barbarian women are wicked, and their bastard whelps are creatures of evil who will bring disaster upon country and people.*

This evil creature dropped to one knee, yet his hand remained on the crown prince's shoulder. "Does Brother have any final instructions?" he asked quietly.

"You…you…"

Prince Yan lowered his voice further and whispered deliberately into his ear, “Don’t worry. As your subject and brother, I’ll take good care of the crown prince.”

Li Feng’s lips trembled. A fire seemed to burn in his eyes, but slowly, as his life drew to a close, that flame dimmed and died. He reached out a shaking hand, caught in midair by Prince Yan… So even hands as cold as theirs could simulate the warmth of brotherly love.

The ministers who had been scattered by the rebel army had finally managed to rush over like a flock of stampeding sheep. At an angle unseen by bystanders, Prince Yan smiled softly at Li Feng. When he spoke, however, his voice was steeped in sorrow. “Brother, have you any last words?”

The little crown prince was crying so hard he couldn’t stand up. Li Feng glanced at him, then gently closed his eyes. He had never known the meaning of the word compromise, and been tough and unyielding throughout his life. To think he’d meet his end like this…surrounded by traitors and conspiracies, his son yet childish and unfledged, with no one to support him on the throne.

“We…have spent our entire life toiling for this nation,” he began, his voice a whisper. Realizing what he meant to say, the scholars of the Imperial Censorate and the Department of Supervision as well as the emperor’s palace attendants stopped their crying and rushed forward to listen with bated breath, fearful of missing even one of the emperor’s halting words. Li Feng’s eyes seemed to shimmer with tears as he continued. “We look toward our citizens arrayed under heaven and feel shame. In the past ten years, we…were so troubled, we struggled to sleep. A century from now, we… But the crown prince…the crown prince…the crown prince is still young. He cannot shoulder such heavy burdens…”

Chang Geng turned slightly and glanced toward the troop of iron puppets standing in the distance, beyond the edge of the crowd. Among those lifeless armored monsters, one watched him with gentle eyes. It had once been his sparring partner, a constant companion who’d helped him carry his breakfast all the countless times he woke before dawn to knock on a certain marquis’s door. Its eyes flickered with a faint purple glow, as if someone far away on the front lines gazed at him calmly through the eyes of this lifeless iron giant.

“…We declare Prince Yan our heir. He will succeed our throne. May he carry on the will of our ancestors.”

In the tenth year of Longan, on the first day of the third month, the Longan Emperor Li Feng met his end at the hands of a treacherous minister. In an astonishing turn of events, before passing on, he skipped over the crown prince and declared that he would pass the throne to his brother, Prince Yan.

Prince Yan dealt with the mutinous nobles with brutal efficiency, tearing some of the most influential families in the capital up by their roots. Wielding this legitimate excuse, he cut a bloody swath through the imperial court. The Grand Council unveiled three new decrees overnight, stabilizing court and capital with a firm hand.

But before Jiang Chong and his colleagues could go through the motions of convincing him to take up the role in earnest, Prince Yan—now their nation’s emperor-to-be—left the capital without warning.

If not for the fact that the Grand Council had experienced every sort of tumult up to this point and could withstand even the sky falling, the court would have exploded into chaos once more.

Before taking off, Chang Geng summoned Jiang Chong and walked him through the logistics of delegating all his responsibilities point by point, then handed him a box filled with imperial decrees he had written in advance. His heart was like an arrow nocked to the string, eager to take flight. Given the state of the

war in Jiangnan, Jiang Chong had recognized the possibility that Chang Geng might soon depart the capital. But he never expected him to vanish so suddenly, and was shocked when word reached him the next day.

Overnight, Chang Geng sped to the Northern Camp and borrowed a team of armored hawks to serve as his personal guard, intending to fly directly south.

He was certain something had happened in Liangjiang. Whether it was Cao Chunhua, whom he had sent to watch over Gu Yun, the two undercover agents from the Linyuan Pavilion who had infiltrated the Foreign Affairs Mission, or even Gu Yun himself…their letters were all suspiciously optimistic about the situation on the front lines, filled with reassurances that they would soon be in a position to recover Jiangnan. It was abnormal.

Gu Yun he expected to sweep bad news under the rug, but the point of the Linyuan Pavilion, noted right in the organization's name, was that its members were expected to conduct their investigations as if approaching the abyss—treading with utmost caution while marking the subtlest details. Even if they really had achieved an overwhelming victory over the Westerners as the reports claimed, they ought to still consider all potential risks and meticulously relay their findings to both Gu Yun and the master of the Linyuan tablet in the capital.

Yet they hadn't reported a word. It was beyond strange.

Chang Geng had carried out his plan in the capital methodically and with apparent ease, but in reality, toward the end, he could hardly sit still thinking of what might have happened in the south. But he couldn't leave to see Gu Yun at such a critical juncture. There were too many variables, and he wouldn't know until the very last moment whether he would succeed. If the unexpected happened, there was a significant possibility he would have to pick up a sword with his own two hands and bear the ignominious titles of "traitorous scoundrel" and "kinslayer." Throughout it all, he couldn't afford to involve himself with Gu Yun in any way.

He'd had no choice but to leave Gu Yun on the front lines, where he couldn't see him.

It was impossible for an armored hawk to fly all the way to Jiangbei without stopping to rest, and so it was while Chang Geng was waiting impatiently for his team to refuel at a military relay station that the red-tagged emergency dispatch arrived from Liangjiang. The commander of the Northern Camp promptly intercepted the dispatch and presented it to Chang Geng: in a brazen move, the Western navy had readied their fleet within Dongying waters and launched a frenzied counterattack.

Chapter 127:
A New Emperor

"WHEN WILL THE HAWKS be ready?" Chang Geng asked, doing his best to master his mounting agitation.

The commander who had accompanied him from the Northern Camp responded in a low voice. "Patience, Your Majesty; we're almost ready to fly."

"Don't call me that, it's not appropriate." Chang Geng unhappily rejected the flattery without a second thought. Only after the words left his mouth did he notice his own restlessness. He sucked in a deep breath and dug his fingers into his sleeve, where a scrap of fabric was hidden. Whether it had been cut with a pair of shears or simply torn off, he had no notion, but its edge was ragged, as if it had been gnawed by a dog. This scrap had come tucked in a personal letter from Gu Yun and at first, Chang Geng couldn't fathom what it was. Gu Yun declared in his letter that it was a length of belt he didn't need—the consequence of wasting away from a year's worth of yearning. Once he had been properly satisfied, he had written, he would ask Chang Geng to sew it back on for him. In the same letter, he had mentioned that he had a secret personal wish, but as he had run out of paper, he would reveal it to Chang Geng in his next letter…

"The late emperor left his imperial edict. The rest is just formality—why be so rigid, Your Majesty?" The commander diverted his train of thought, the picture of obedience as he delivered his flattery.

The present commander of the Northern Camp was an eloquent and highly competent individual, the complete opposite of the departed Tan Hongfei. Noting the new emperor's expression, he added, "Think of it this way: Marquis Gu has already cut the Westerners' supply lines. Even if they strike back now, our enemies are an arrow at the end of its flight. With the marshal himself on the front lines, what does Your Majesty have to worry about?"

Chang Geng said nothing. He knew the false news of the Foreign Affairs Mission successfully completing their assassination attempt spread by Liu Zhong and the Linyuan Pavilion must have been approved by Gu Yun. The communication blockade that followed was also bait to lure the enemy into attacking. When Chang Geng calmed down enough to think things over, it was obvious Gu Yun had used the nobles' attempted coup in the capital as the final element needed to wipe out the Westerners. His tactical brilliance was sufficient to be recorded in the annals of history, so indeed, what had Chang Geng to worry about?

Even the commander of the Northern Camp could grasp this, so how could Chang Geng not?

But for some reason, he felt desperately anxious—or perhaps it wasn't anxiety at all, but rather that he simply missed Gu Yun too much.

The soldiers inside the relay station hurried over to report that the hawk armor was refueled, and they could be on their way. Chang Geng had scarcely risen to his feet when three letters from the Liangjiang Garrison arrived in rapid succession. None of these were meant to be posted to the capital. When fighting broke out along the front lines, orders were commonly sent to the surrounding

military relay stations and local garrisons to prepare them to send reinforcements or raise their state of alert.

The first letter said, *Enemy attack*; the second said, *Major battle underway*; and the third was a direct order for all troops to raise their combat readiness to the highest state of alert: *The enemy has turned out in full force, we will meet them with maximum strength.* All three letters were delivered before a single stick of incense had burned out.

The commander of the Northern Camp felt his head was about to explode. "Your Majesty, the front line is too dangerous. Please be patient and await news here. When the situation has stabilized…"

Chang Geng was already on his feet. "You're right; you should stay here."

The commander gaped in shock.

Everyone on the front lines was readying themselves on the eve of battle; no one expected their new emperor was just hours away, streaking toward the battlefield.

Over a month had passed since Gu Yun was wounded at sea. In the aftermath of the capital siege, Gu Yun had gone from being dug out of a pile of corpses to donning his armor and returning to the northwestern front in about the same span of time. It had been but a few short years, yet that kind of rapid recovery was now merely the remembered heroics of a bygone youth.

Gu Yun had drifted in and out of unconsciousness for over half a month and lost a dramatic amount of weight. Shen Yi would later say that during these handful of weeks, his breath was so weak he feared Gu Yun might pass at any time. Whatever it was that kept him hanging by a thread, he clung to it with all his might and miraculously pulled through. Yet he still struggled to stand and spent half an age gathering his strength before he could take a single turn around the room. Because they didn't dare remove the steel panels affixed to his body, sitting for any length of time caused him excruciating pain.

Pain had never been something Gu Yun feared. He was long accustomed to it and believed pain was the body's way of protecting itself, not necessarily a bad thing. But he had never experienced this kind of pain-induced exhaustion. It wasn't all bad news—on the bright side, his eyes seemed to be slowly recovering. Yao Zhen had sent his men to ask among the locals until they found an old craftsman, who constructed a custom-made glass monocle for Gu Yun. With its aid, Gu Yun could begin to make out objects within three meters and communicate a bit with others. The cut along his throat, too, was fairly shallow, and had already healed over; it was just that his voice tended to grow hoarse when he spoke for too long.

Unfortunately, he couldn't refrain from speaking.

The Westerners were making their last stand. The enemy commander was that elderly pope who had on multiple occasions fought Gu Yun to a stalemate at sea. Although the waters had been muddied by a pack of indecisive Dongying folk attempting to play both sides, Great Liang's navy would have to gain a decisive advantage to obtain the shogunate's unequivocal support—otherwise, it was impossible to guess whom Dongying would stab in the back.

Ever since a Dongying agent had arrived, just as Gu Yun predicted, offering intelligence about the Westerners' plans, Gu Yun hadn't had a full night's sleep.

Between his myriad concerns and the pain of his wounds—this latter, if he was being honest, was the primary reason—he lay awake until dawn more often than not. There had been no movement on the part of the soldiers outside, but he was so desperate to consider every possible situation that he had already fought several hundred skirmishes in the battleground of his mind.

In preparation for this deadly endgame, Gu Yun had transferred the entire Black Hawk division from the northwest to the south. He Ronghui and several other commanders, hoping to nurture the next generation, brought along young General Cai and a few greenhorn officers to gain experience. With Shen Yi and Yao Zhen helming the sea and He Ronghui and true Black Hawks commanding the sky, the strongest soldiers of Great Liang, honed on years of war and chaos, had all been assembled on the battlefield in Jiangnan.

This time, Gu Yun wasn't alone in the commander's tent; little General Cai and a group of Black Iron Battalion veterans clustered inside as armored hawks came and went, addressing each new battle report with swift efficiency.

Initially, the Westerners attempted to bombard them with heavy artillery, hoping to take advantage of the Liangjiang Garrison's supposed internal strife to catch them off guard. Sure enough, the Liangjiang Garrison scattered in faux panic and raised an iron boom to block their enemy's advance. In reality, this boom had been recently reinforced, and its new defensive capabilities were astonishing. A squadron of vanguard troops hidden behind the boom periodically fired off shots, allowing the Westerners to waste their ammunition returning fire.

The Liangjiang forces quickly readied an ambush: Yao Zhen had boarded a sea dragon warship, while Shen Yi and He Ronghui were preparing to suit up and awaiting orders.

It was like this, tucked between the rapid exchange of battlefield reports and orders, that news of the Longan Emperor's passing arrived. The green- and white-tagged emergency dispatch stood out like a sore thumb amid the flurry of concise battle reports. Presuming the mail canister contained some routine tidings from the imperial court, no one paid it any mind. Only once they had finished laying out their battle formations and the Westerners' cannon fire had died down did Xiao-Cai diligently carry the canister into the commander's tent.

Shen Yi was out, so Xiao-Cai opened the canister for Gu Yun. "Sir, a green tag means urgent news from the court, but what does a white tag mean?" he asked in curiosity.

Gu Yun had been forcing himself to alertness all this time, but he was noticeably drained. Rubbing at his temples, he responded with an absentminded "… What?"

Noting Gu Yun's poor complexion, Xiao-Cai didn't dare disturb him further. He hurried to help Gu Yun lie down and pulled a blanket over him. "Please get some rest, sir. I'll call you if anything comes up."

With that, the young man quietly withdrew to the other side of the tent and opened the canister in silence, planning to skim its contents before setting it aside with the other correspondence that could be addressed after the battle. A single glance, however, stopped him cold. The young general was barely twenty, and his experience was limited to riding recklessly at the head of the vanguard under his elderly father's command. He had never witnessed such a major political upheaval and was momentarily stunned.

He Ronghui was washing his face as he directed a nearby guard to prepare his armor. Spotting the boy's dumbstruck expression, he asked, "Xiao-Cai, aren't you coming with me? Stop woolgathering and get ready. What are you dawdling for?"

Young General Cai blinked hard. "He-dage, this letter…" he mumbled. "It says His Majesty's dead."

Gu Yun had developed an extreme sensitivity to the cold after his injury. Out of consideration for him, everyone worked together to ensure that the commander's tent was always warm. He Ronghui naturally ran hot; he had no choice but to run to the door every now and again to splash cold water on his perspiring face. Upon hearing these words, he slowly straightened up from where he was bent over with his bum sticking out, his beard dripping water and his mouth agape. "What?"

"His Majesty's dead…" Xiao-Cai licked his lips, dazed. After a moment's hesitation, he steeled himself and dropped to one knee beside Gu Yun's bed. "Sir, sir," he called softly, tugging timidly at Gu Yun's robe.

"He won't hear you." He Ronghui strode forward, dragged Gu Yun up out of bed, and shook him by the shoulders as he began to shout, his voice booming like a gong. "Marshal! Oi, marshal! Wake up! It's dire news—the emperor's kicked the damn bucket!"

Young General Cai stood flabbergasted.

Gu Yun had hardly begun to doze when he was rattled back to wakefulness, eyes unfocused with sleep.

He Ronghui seemed to recall something. He turned back to Xiao-Cai. "Wait—who's the emperor now that he's dead? That tiny little brat?" He lifted his fan-sized hand waist-high, rudely marking the height of the little crown prince.

"…Before His Majesty departed this life, he passed the throne to His Highness Prince Yan."

He Ronghui was a crude man with a quick temper, but he was no idiot. He did a double take, then asked, baffled, "He passed the throne to Prince Yan instead of his own son? That makes no sense. Did he take the wrong medicine before he died or what?"

Eyes flicking over the pair's lips as they spoke, Gu Yun finally caught on to what they were yammering about and was scared into lucidity. "Give me that!"

This unexpected revelation caused a momentary lull in orders. Puzzled by the silence from the command tent, Shen Yi, fully decked out in battle regalia, and Cao Chunhua, presently disguised as Gu Yun, were about to send someone to ask what was going on. Yet to the surprise of all and before anyone could fully digest the news, the fabled new emperor arrived in the flesh.

The garrison was in the middle of active battle, and even more heavily guarded than usual. At first, the sentries couldn't believe their ears. It wasn't until the commander of the Northern Camp produced the emperor's tiger tally that one of them scrambled off to notify their superiors. Chang Geng didn't wait; he charged straight in with his company of hawks in tow—but before he could reach the commander's tent, he ran into Cao Chunhua on his way to board a warship.

Cao Chunhua was wearing an exact replica of Gu Yun's face. Caught completely on the wrong foot, the two of them stared at each other in bewilderment for a frozen moment. It had been too long since Chang Geng last saw Gu Yun. His heart beat wildly, but before he could release his held breath, "Gu Yun" seemed suddenly overcome with great fright, his eyes darting left and right in panic. With a sharp jerk of his horse's reins, he turned tail and bolted.

Chang Geng stared.

He would have to be blind not to recognize who this was after that little performance. Chang Geng was about to call out to stop him, but he bit the words back for fear of ruining some secret plan of Gu Yun's. Instead, he galloped after the imposter, seized the steed's reins, and yanked both horse and rider to a halt. "Xiao. Cao," he ground out between his teeth.

Cao Chunhua wanted to cry. Clambering off his horse, he bowed his head and glanced meekly up at Chang Geng, who looked like a moneylender come to collect. Cao Chunhua had yet to learn the earth-shattering news from the capital and sniffled mournfully, "Your Highness."

Chang Geng glared furiously back at him. "I sent you here to take care of him, and here you are, doing his bidding and using all manner of lies to keep me in the dark!"

Cao Chunhua shamelessly twisted Gu Yun's face into a mask of abject suffering. Chang Geng turned aside; looking at this person made his stomach ache. He honestly had no idea how Cao Chunhua had managed to sneak behind enemy lines so many times without blowing his cover.

"Well…you know what they say…when the general is on the battlefield, he need not obey all of the emperor's orders, right?" Cao Chunhua mumbled, taking his sweet time leading Chang Geng toward the commander's tent. "Without the marshal's permission, I-I-I-I wouldn't have been able to send you updates even if I wanted to…"

Chang Geng huffed angrily, but let him off the hook at last. "And what are you supposed to be? A decoy marshal?"

Frazzled, Cao Chunhua laughed awkwardly as he shot Shen Yi a speaking glance. Leaving Cao Chunhua to stall Chang Geng, Shen Yi dashed back to the commander's tent. It was as though they were running a distraction maneuver within their own garrison, one person holding up the enemy while the other sprinted off to report to their superior. Cao Chunhua breathed a small sigh of relief as he watched Shen Yi turn on his heel and rush back to the commander's tent, but before the air could fully escape his lungs, he heard Chang Geng's clipped speech: "What are you looking at?"

Cao Chunhua turned mute.

Chang Geng shook off Cao Chunhua with growing suspicion. He had previously spent over a month in the Liangjiang Garrison; a quick scan of the area yielded the location of the commander's tent, and he began striding over.

"Your Highness! Your Highness!" Cao Chunhua grabbed at Chang Geng's sleeve in desperation as he gulped nervously. "Your Highness, you…you must remain calm."

Shen Yi burst into Gu Yun's tent in a panic, looking as if the Western pope's giant sea monster was nipping at his heels. "Gu-Gu-Gu Zi… Gu Zixi!"

"Jiping, my dear fellow, when did you acquire a stutter?" He Ronghui asked, bemused.

Shen Yi didn't spare him a look. Launching himself to Gu Yun's bedside, he wheezed, "That little highness of yours is here. You-you-you…"

Everyone inside the tent was still hung up on the fact that Prince Yan had ascended the throne; they failed to grasp to whom this "little highness" referred. He Ronghui and Xiao-Cai stared at each other, confounded, as Gu Yun slowly parsed what he had read from Shen Yi's stumbling lips. Incredulous, he asked, "Chang Geng?"

Shen Yi nodded, his face as distraught as the newly bereaved.

Gu Yun's face drained of color. If not for his physical weakness, he would have sprung from the bed. Feeling as though he had been caught in the act by his wife, he sputtered, "Is there space under the bed for me to hide? Old He, out of the way, move, move, move…*cough*…"

He choked on his words, triggering a violent coughing fit. Before he could recover, a gentle spring breeze drifted in from the tent flap and brushed the back of the deaf-blind man's pale hand. Through his custom glass monocle, Gu Yun vaguely made out a slender figure silhouetted in the doorway.

Gu Yun froze.

Busted.

The room went deathly silent. Gu Yun was paralyzed by fear, while everyone else sat mouths agog at finding the new emperor mentioned in the emergency dispatch had appeared before their very eyes.

Shen Yi, the only one without the slightest idea of what was going on, broke the silence. "Don't look at me, I ran as fast as I could."

He Ronghui had met Prince Yan back when the prince escorted the supply caravan to the northwest. He was the first to snap to attention with a tentative, "Your Majesty?"

As if waking from a dream, everyone sank to their knees in a kowtow, one after another. Chang Geng's eyes never strayed from Gu Yun as he waved a stiff hand. "When last we met, we were brothers. There's no need for all that," he said, barely maintaining his veneer of calm.

Shen Yi's mind crowded with questions as he watched Chang Geng slowly make his way in, politely nodding in Shen Yi's direction before sailing past to stop before the bed.

Chang Geng stared at Gu Yun until his eyes began to sting like they were pricked by needles. Even so, he refused to look away. Gu Yun's body was covered in steel panels, the bandages beneath his robe spotted with blood. A layer of fragile skin was stretched over his exposed collarbones and wrists, and his lips were bloodless. The custom glass monocle he wore consisted of multiple lenses layered on top of each other, the device so thick it obscured half his face. His one unobstructed eye stared blankly into the distance, unable to gather focus yet flickering with a subtle trace of nervousness.

Under all those watching eyes, Chang Geng slowly sat down beside Gu Yun and tugged his blanket back into place. At the sight of the open mail canister, he turned to the commander of the Northern Camp, who had followed him all the way to the commander's tent. "Take our tiger tally. Inform the soldiers of every division that their sovereign has arrived. This we declare—we will advance and retreat with our fellow soldiers and emerge victorious from this battle."

A hush fell over the commander's tent. Then a voice rang out:

"Long live the emperor!"

The cry raced from the commander's tent through the entire garrison as if on spread wings. For the first time in centuries, both tiger tallies appeared in the same place, hanging from a battle flag whipping in the wind like a powerful grounding force, unshakable by tidal waves or cannon fire. Although the new emperor was yet uncrowned, the fealty of the military generals throughout the realm was already his.

The thunder of artillery fire erupted once more as the Westerners resumed their assault on the iron boom. Gu Yun dared not tarry a moment longer; his officers filed out, off to carry out their new orders. Gu Yun's messenger tactfully withdrew as well, leaving only Gu Yun and Chang Geng in the commander's tent. The instant they were alone, while Gu Yun was still searching for the right words, Chang Geng swayed on his feet. He felt as though someone had torn out his spine; he struggled to stand as his chest heaved like he was in excruciating pain, panting for breath. His hand came up to clutch at his heart, and his jaw clenched as his shoulders curled, back wound tight enough to snap.

Scared out of his wits, Gu Yun hastily reached out to press careful fingers to his back. "Chang Geng, what's wrong?"

Chang Geng grabbed his hand in a panic, clutching it as though he was clinging to his last hope. He was gasping so hard he couldn't even speak, the veins at his temples bulging from the strain.

In all the years Gu Yun had looked after him, Chang Geng had never shown any signs of a malady of the heart. Gu Yun immediately called out, "Where are the medics? Guards—"

One of the guards outside poked his head back into the commander's tent.

"Get out! Don't come in!" Chang Geng squeezed the words from his throat.

The bewildered guard didn't dare defy imperial orders and hastily ducked back outside.

Gu Yun looked at Chang Geng, at a loss for what to do. Chang Geng's eyes were bloodshot and seemed on the verge of twinning, yet the shadow of the second pupil was stuck to the first, as though strung together on a thread. Marshal Gu braced himself as Chang Geng slowly turned toward him, prepared to weather another one of his flare-ups.

But after a turn or more, Chang Geng only said with deadly calm, "If I had come any later, would I have ever seen you again?"

Gu Yun had no way to respond.

"All this time, I've been off in the capital listening to nobles squabble while happily awaiting the day of your return, so I could finally show you the completed steam railway—so I could talk to you and sew that stupid belt of yours back on—but what about you?" Chang Geng asked, his voice soft as he slowly tightened his

grip on Gu Yun's hand and pulled it toward his chest. He gazed down at Gu Yun's sickly-pale fingers. "Tell me, would that day ever come?"

It was as though a steel nail had punched a hole through Gu Yun's heart, and for a moment, he found himself completely bereft of words.

"I hate you," Chang Geng said. "I hate you to death, Gu Zixi."

These words had weighed heavy on his heart alongside his nightmarish wu'ergu attacks ever since Gu Yun left him behind in the Marquis Estate to sneak off to the northwest, all those years ago. But now, after enduring torturous treatment that had reduced the influence of the wu'ergu by half, he could no longer suppress them. Finally, he spoke them aloud.

Chang Geng broke down as, for a brief moment, he deviated from the path he had chosen for himself in his childhood of shedding only blood and not tears. His Majesty, Great Liang's new emperor, who had minutes ago delivered a resounding speech before his generals, dissolved into bitter tears in the commander's tent.

Chapter 128:
Finale—An End and a Beginning

GU YUN WANTED to reach out and embrace Chang Geng, but after two failed attempts to tug him closer, he simply sat beside him in silence, not daring to make a sound as Chang Geng sobbed out the many grievances he had held back for over a decade all at once. But the new emperor was a luckless man; before he could satisfy himself crying his fill, a blast of cannon fire rocked the commander's tent, followed by the screech of steel wings slicing through the air.

Chang Geng had barely drawn back from the bed when an armored hawk burst in. "Sir, the boom's been breached. The Westerners have come into range!"

Gu Yun's fingertips were stained with Chang Geng's tears. He curled them into a fist and nodded. "Understood. Follow the plan and pin them down."

The hawk messenger's feet touched the ground for scant moments before he was taking off again.

Chang Geng turned back to look at Gu Yun. Tear tracks still marred his cheeks; he was the picture of wounded distress. Utterly defenseless against such a face, Gu Yun immediately capitulated. "Chang Geng, come here," he said softly. "Let me dry your tears."

"What happened to that honeyed tongue of yours?" Chang Geng asked, his voice choked with sobs.

Sighing, Gu Yun obediently lowered his voice to a deep murmur. "Darling, come, let me lick your tears clean."

For a moment, Chang Geng could barely speak for anger.

While Chang Geng sputtered, Gu Yun grabbed hold of the edge of the bed and dragged himself up. He could barely stand upright, and when he stood, the steel panels encasing his legs clanged against the side of the bed. The tendons in his neck stood out beneath his bandages with the effort, and his unbound hair spilled over his shoulders, dark strands twisting through the chain of his glass monocle.

"What are you doing; stop that!" Chang Geng snapped.

As he strode forward to push Gu Yun down onto the bed, Gu Yun seized the opportunity to pull him into his arms.

Gu Yun's temples were sheened with sweat, his breathing quick and shallow. The weight of his body sagged against Chang Geng, the cumbersome steel plates affixed to his body an aggravating barrier between them. Eyes lightly closed, he sucked in a breath and stroked fingers over Chang Geng's tense back. "Beat me or yell at me, whatever you like, but let me hold you a while first, okay? I've missed you so much."

Chang Geng had finally managed to compose himself, yet now his eyes began to sting again. He clung desperately to Gu Yun's waist and felt that his excess length of belt was much more than the small section that had been torn off. "I…"

Whatever he wanted to say was drowned out by the frenzied roar of artillery fire.

Gu Yun turned slightly and pressed a kiss to Chang Geng's cheek. Incredibly, he was as good as his word, trailing his lips along the tracks left by Chang Geng's tears until he reached Chang Geng's mouth, tasting faintly of salt. Chang Geng's lips trembled—whether in pain, anger, or anticipation, neither knew—all throughout. Gu Yun paused for a heartbeat, then leaned in and licked at the seam of Chang Geng's mouth.

Chang Geng tightened his grip on Gu Yun's waist—but before he could get a proper taste, the screech of yet another armored hawk split the air, so loud it was audible even to the deaf.

Chang Geng was speechless. There really was no end to it!

All of Great Liang's up-and-coming commanding officers and elite soldiers were gathered here on the front lines in this battle. Did these bastards really have to run back to the commander's tent to request new orders at every fresh development? In the heat of the moment, His Majesty didn't stop to think that perhaps he oughtn't drag Great Liang's commander in chief off for a lovers' tryst amid crashing artillery fire.

A Black Hawk flung open the tent flap. "Sir, the Western ships have caught on; they're in retreat! General Shen managed to corner the enemy's flagship with our cuttlefish. General He asks when the Black Hawks' main force can move out."

Gu Yun swiped a thumb over the corner of his mouth. "We wait until the enemy flagship makes its final play."

The Black Hawk saluted before turning to roar away, leaving Gu Yun and Chang Geng to look at each other awkwardly. Chang Geng had yet to quiet his racing heart. Helpless, he smiled weakly as he half-carried Gu Yun back to the bed. After pulling Gu Yun's blankets back in place, he retrieved the ragged length of fabric Gu Yun had sent him from his lapels and fished a needle and thread from his sachet. The thread was the precise blue-green of the fabric; he had obviously come prepared. Tugging Gu Yun's belt over, Chang Geng turned it around to inspect it: sure enough, someone had carelessly torn off one end, leaving behind a mess of fraying threads.

"Does the marshal walk around in these rags every day?" Chang Geng asked, exasperated.

Eyes narrowed, Gu Yun read his lips then laughed softly. "No, I just happened to put on these robes. Perhaps our hearts connected in our dreams—I had an inkling Your Majesty would personally come repair my belt today."

The needle stilled. Before Chang Geng could glance up at Gu Yun's expression, a hand landed on his face. Gu Yun stroked his fingers up along Chang Geng's jaw toward the base of his ear. "Aren't you tired?"

Chang Geng blinked rapidly. Perhaps the pain just now had been too intense; he felt a dam within him was about to break. Gu Yun had spoken three scant words, yet Chang Geng's eyes were filling with tears. He asked in response, "Doesn't it hurt?"

He thought Gu Yun would remain silent, but to his surprise, after a few beats, Gu Yun answered honestly: "It hurts so much I can hardly sleep."

Chang Geng's hands trembled, as though pricked by a needle.

“But it doesn’t hurt as much as seeing you cry,” Gu Yun went on. “Don’t cry anymore, or your yifu will have nightmares for the rest of his life.”

As far back as childhood, Chang Geng had never been able to discern when Gu Yun was being glib and when he was sincerely trying to comfort him. He could only treat all of Gu Yun’s words as if they were spoken in earnest, and now, his heart softened.

“Most of the wu’ergu has been purged, right? Miss Chen has taken good care of you. This battle is as good as won. The enemy has held nothing back; they’ve charged straight into our ambush. The second they’re within range, a large shoal of cuttlefish is waiting to swarm their flagship. That monster of theirs has a fatal flaw: its response time is too slow in an emergency. When the Western pope is pushed to his limit, he’ll inevitably—”

An earth-shattering rumble cut him off. Gu Yun couldn’t hear it, but he could feel the bed shaking. Smiling serenely, he waited a full quarter hour until the tremors gradually subsided before picking up where he left off. “—he’ll bring out all that heavy artillery beneath his flagship’s shell and try to brute force his way through. The Western flagship is stuffed with violet gold and gunpowder, yet it has never revealed its true capabilities on the battlefield. We’ve considered it, and we believe there are two reasons for this: First, it can’t afford to consume so much fuel. Second, the moment the flagship enters the fray itself, it can no longer issue instructions to the sea dragon fleet under its—”

A Black Hawk dove down to make a third battle report: “Sir, there’s something wrong with the Western flagship. Just now, General Shen took advantage of the chaos to outflank it and sank nearly half their fleet! The Black Hawks are preparing to pursue…”

He fell silent as the scream of hawks reached their ears—the sound of a flock of aerial assassins tens of thousands strong beating their dark wings against the wind.

“Your Majesty.” Gu Yun turned to Chang Geng. “Would you like to see how our army recovers Jiangnan?”

Gu Yun looked nothing like a wounded soldier confined to his sickbed when he spoke about the battle. His manner was that of the great general who once infiltrated Prince Wei’s rebel army, who had crushed the southwestern bandits, who had pacified the northwest, and who would now retake Jiangnan as methodically as laying stones on a weiqi board.

Chang Geng’s expression was solemn. “My general’s word is worth more than gold. He is invincible in battle.”

Among the aircraft stationed in the Liangjiang Garrison was a fortified red-headed kite. Chang Geng helped Gu Yun out of the commander’s tent and aboard, and the vessel slowly rose into the air over the garrison. The entire battlefield, from the iron ships crossing the blue-green sea like flood dragons, to the billowing smoke rising in all directions, was visible through a field scope from their high vantage.

The Western navy dragged out their final struggle for over four hours before finally running out of steam. The damaged enemy flagship gathered up the scattered remains of their fleet and fled toward Dongying in a limping retreat. Refusing to release their prey, Great Liang’s navy gave chase, once and for all putting to rest the idea that they were incapable of fighting on the open seas. The chase continued into

the night, brazenly encroaching on Dongying coastal waters.

Gu Yun, who had managed to endure the pain of his injuries to watch the entire battle, began to smile. Dongying would become the Far Westerners' burial ground.

As the Western navy fled, they sent four dispatches in rapid succession requesting military support from Dongying. But like stones cast into the sea, all four were met with silence. Instead, as the relentless Great Liang navy pursued them into Dongying waters, the Westerners were stunned to find a fleet of steely Dongying sea dragon warships—their own gift to these wokou pirates at the start of the war—blocking their way.

The two fleets closed in on each other. A Western signalman waved his flags so frantically he nearly fell overboard, only for their erstwhile ally to respond with a harsh string of syllables and an unmistakable message. As one, the Dongying battleships turned their cannon muzzles on the ships of their former comrades and fired.

A bloodred sunset spilled across the sea, as if closing the final curtain on these years of war.

Gu Yun chuckled softly at the sight of the explosions far out across the surface of the water. He had seen the battle to its end, and was truly drained, so exhausted he knew he'd fall asleep the moment his head hit his pillow. Yet Chang Geng suddenly leaned over to grasp his chin and tilt his face toward his own. "You said in your last letter that you had a secret personal wish, but that you'd run out of space. What was it?"

Gu Yun began to laugh.

"What was it?" Chang Geng pressed.

Gu Yun tugged him closer and murmured into his ear, "I wish…to spend the rest of my life growing old with you."

Chang Geng drew in a sharp breath. After a moment to gather himself, he finally said, "You're the one who said it. A great general's word is worth more than gold…"

"And lo, I am invincible in battle," Gu Yun finished.

In the tenth year of Longan, on the fourth day of the third month, after an entire day and night of battle and the betrayal of their Dongying allies, the Western navy that had occupied the East Sea for years suffered total defeat at the hands of Great Liang's young navy. The new emperor, having judged Gu Yun's mission successfully completed, dragged the marshal back to the capital to recuperate.

A fortnight later, the railway officially opened for service. With this major lifeline connecting northern and southern Great Liang, large quantities of engines, armor, and violet gold could be transported south at a moment's notice, allowing the Liangjiang Garrison to quickly commission several naval bases for amphibious aircraft. Meanwhile, under Shen Yi's command, ground forces scoured Great Liang's southern territories, expelling the remaining Western occupiers.

Cut off from their powerful navy and ground support, the Western soldiers garrisoned in Jiangnan were blown away like fallen leaves by the autumn wind,

their fragile vanguard crumpling at the first blow. The clean-up lasted two short months; by the fifth month of the year, the Western army was formally tendering their surrender to the throne. A large group of prisoners of war were captured and detained within Great Liang, including the pope himself.

The Holy Empire had no choice but to gather up what little dignity they had left and send an envoy to negotiate. The peace terms saw the Westerners handing over cold hard cash in exchange for their prisoners. As for the old and ailing pope, he reportedly died en route to his homeland. Whether his death was natural or the work of his own countrymen, no one knew. It didn't matter anymore.

After so many years, the storm clouds looming over the southern half of the nation dispersed at last, and the sweet fragrance of osmanthus drifted over the plains of Jiangnan in the autumn once more.

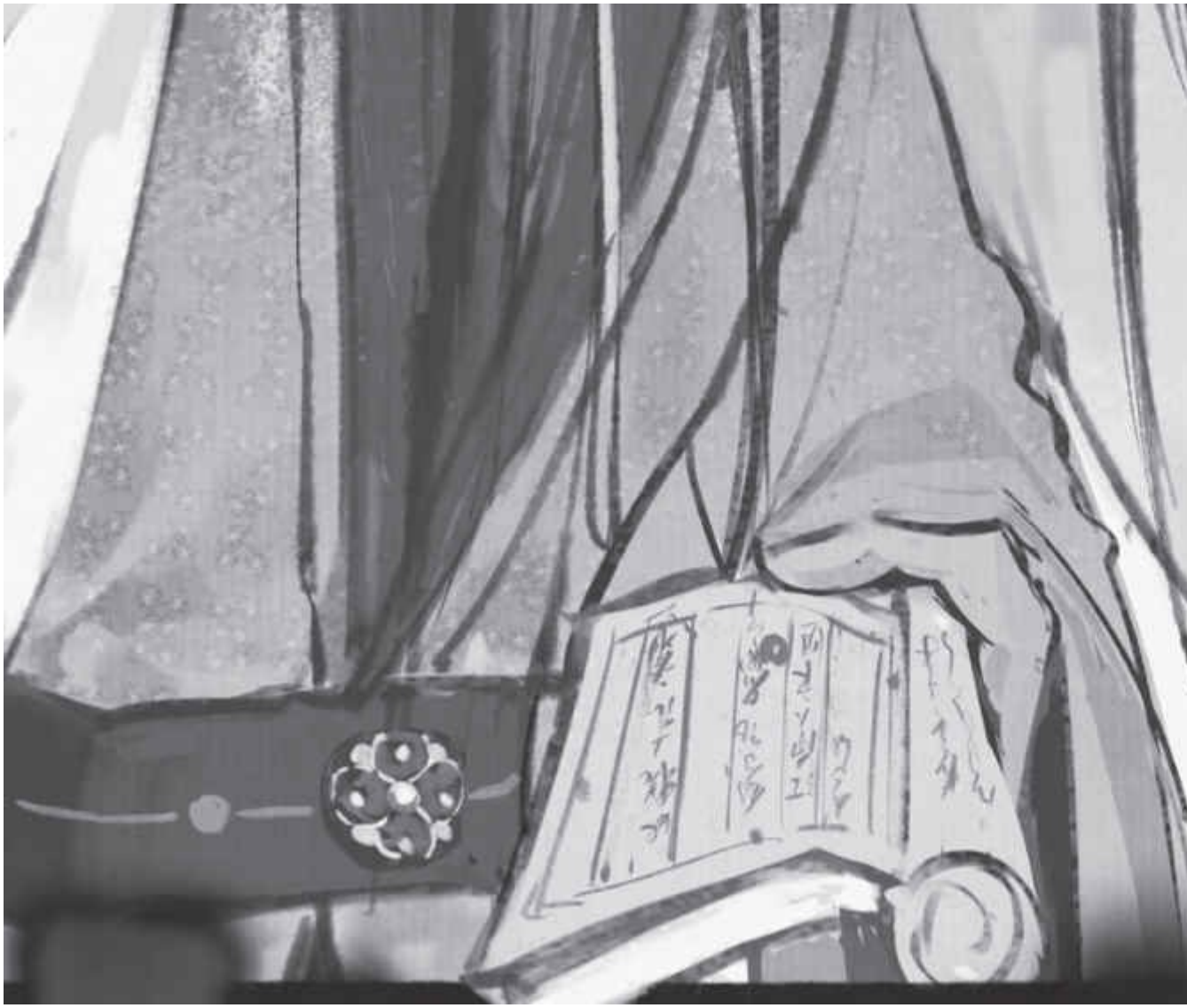
Li Min, the former Prince Yan, formally ascended the throne. The nation adopted his era name, Taishi—Grand Beginning—the following year.

In the early days of his reign, the new emperor issued an imperial edict decreeing that the children of the late emperor may remain in the palace. The little crown prince, he declared, would remain the heir apparent.

Rather than consolidate military power, he left Gu Yun's Black Iron Tiger Tally in his marshal's hands, and further granted Gu Yun authority to oversee the nation's military from the capital and deploy forces to the four borders as he saw fit. Gu Yun's first act was to break up the three divisions of the Black Iron Battalion and reassign them to various garrisons throughout the nation. The group of valiant soldiers that had grown up in the smoke of war thus carried forward the will of their ancestors, taking up the defense of the nation on all sides.

During his eighteen years in power, the Taishi Emperor, who had always regarded himself as emperor-regent, issued a series of laws restricting the powers of everyone from himself as the head of state, down to the various civil and military officials of the court, and even the common people. It was a fair and impartial code that defined an individual's personal rights and responsibilities while allowing for regular reflection on one's shortcomings. His large-scale reforms slowly pushed aside the miasma of injustice and corruption that had blanketed the land for millennia.

The end of one era would always herald the beginning of another.



EX

Extra:
Return of Departed Souls

CHANG GENG DREAMED of a scene from many years ago. The pungent stench of kerosene stung his nose, mixing with the salt-sweet tang of blood and the earthy must of hay. He was a child, curled up inside a tattered basket carried on the back of a woman, jolting with each of her steps as she limped along.

Huge'er's hair fell long and dark, thick as a rain cloud, but her body was so thin that her head seemed disproportionately large, giving the impression of a misassembled skeleton. She hummed a tune of the northern grasslands as she walked alone through the mass grave that had been the mountain bandits' hideout. In the dream, she turned, meeting the child Chang Geng's eyes. He instinctively shrank back. He had grown into an indomitable adult, but this frail woman would always have the power to hurt him. His fear of her was carved into his bones.

But this time, she merely gazed at him for a span, her face streaked with blood, her lips pale, and her expression wooden. Her entire soul seemed to lay coiled within her eyes, a pair of placid pools with perilous reefs hidden in their depth like jagged teeth.

She sighed softly. She didn't seem angry as she reached out a bone-thin hand and patted Chang Geng's small head. The tune she hummed changed—all across the world people spoke different languages, yet the lullabies mothers sang to their children were nearly all the same. Chang Geng felt surprise; he'd never realized he still remembered this scene.

Hoisting him higher on her back, Huge'er walked down an endless road of death. At the foot of the mountain, she stopped. Behind her, the slopes burned in silence, thick plumes of smoke rising into the air as vengeful ghosts sank into the earth. Wiping away the thin layer of sweat sheening her forehead, she sat by the roadside to rest and lifted little Chang Geng out of his basket. The child instinctively began to struggle as Huge'er's eyes fixed on his face. He could only guess what she saw there—her expression reflected an indescribable mix of tenderness and melancholy.

Settling Chang Geng in her lap, she traced over his immature features with gentle fingers before bending to press a soft kiss to his forehead.

Chang Geng didn't dare blink. He watched as the foreign woman's eyelashes trembled, like butterflies ready to soar skyward at the slightest startle. Tears coursed down her cheeks. "Why did you have to be born here, child?" she asked, her voice faint. "Did the Sky send you here merely to suffer?"

Watching her like this, through the lens of a decades-old memory, he realized—her bloody hands were vicious whenever she tried to strangle him through her sobs, but her eyes were always gentle. Yet after she cried herself to exhaustion and returned to her senses, when she loosened her hands from their vise grip around his neck and poured a mouthful of vital air back into his starved lungs, her eyes were always unfeelingly cold.

Every time she cried and dried her tears, a portion of her soul seemed to drain away. And as she grew colder and more detached, her relationship with little Chang

Geng, too, gradually became less violent.

Chang Geng watched as his child self followed her over the course of her meandering journey.

He looked on as, one day, Huge'er glanced at Chang Geng's foot. Clutching at her face in terrified shock, she stumbled back several steps and curled into a ball before bursting into bitter sobs beneath the boy's bewildered gaze.

In his dream, Chang Geng looked down to discover that, in a miraculous turn, his toe was healing itself…

But what did it mean?

Chang Geng fought for the memory. The crystal-clear dreamscape seemed to restore something buried deep in his childish mind. He remembered: when he was very young—too young to form lasting memories—he did indeed have a toe that had been deformed at birth yet somehow healed itself later on.

As in the legends, he was the product of two bodies merged into a single whole, destined to develop the characteristics of the child he had devoured. Aside from giving Huge'er a terrible fright, his regenerated toe served as a constant reminder that she had sacrificed her son to create a monster. She watched in horror as this little wicked god began to exhibit her own child's features.

Chang Geng gazed down at her with compassionate eyes. From his removed perspective in the dream, he suddenly understood something of how this madwoman must have felt.

It was too easy, in a moment of excruciating pain—overcome with fury over a nation's humiliation or desire to avenge one's family—

to resort to extremes, to take one's own life or even that of one's flesh-and-blood child. Yet when all was said and done, it was but a momentary agony. Any pain could fade, given enough time, even if one was drenched in blood in the healing. But Huge'er had not healed—she had chosen unceasing torment, a death by a thousand cuts.

He watched Huge'er rush over, seize his foot, and smash it with a large rock…

He was dreaming, but the pain was real.

Huge'er ruthlessly bent his toe as she chanted as if possessed, "You are not my child, *you are not my child*…"

Trapped between dream and reality, Chang Geng groaned as his toe went numb.

Without warning, a cold, firm hand grasped his foot. The cool touch eased the fiery agony, and Chang Geng gulped several breaths of air. A voice murmured in his ear, "Shhh—it's over. I'm here. It's over."

Chang Geng looked up in confusion as the scene shifted around him. His body stretched and grew, but he was still covered in cuts and bruises. A bitter chill seeped into his bones. In the desolate lands beyond the pass, he narrowed his eyes and spied a dark silhouette striding out of the snow. The man's cloak billowed in the wind as he walked toward him with resolute steps. An old wine jar wrought from black iron dangled from his waist.

The man's hands were strong as steel, yet his face was as beautiful as a painting. He reached out to Chang Geng. "Won't you come with me?"

Chang Geng stared at him, exhausted in body and spirit. He couldn't seem to speak.

"Come with me. You don't have to return to this place ever again."

Chang Geng grasped his outstretched hand and allowed himself to be pulled along. He felt himself growing taller and taller, stronger and stronger, as if he could traverse a vast land of mountains and rivers in a single step. As he walked, he glanced back at the frozen land beyond the pass and the pack of wolves, slowly growing smaller in the distance. Huge'er, clad in her pale yellow dress with her hair styled like a young maiden, watched him in silence. At some point, she had been joined by another figure. It appeared to be a young boy at first, but as Chang Geng grew up, that figure, too, transformed into a youth, into a young man…

He stood shoulder to shoulder with Huge'er. His face was identical to Chang Geng's.

Huge'er turned to the young man beside her. She tugged his head down toward her, raising herself onto tiptoe to drop a kiss on his forehead. The pair watched as Chang Geng walked away.

Chang Geng's eyes flew open. The sun was high in the sky. He felt altered, as if the chains that had shackled his body since birth had melted away, and his body was light, almost alien. The scent of pacifying fragrance permeated the air.

He looked up and spotted Chen Qingxu sitting quietly with an open scroll in her hands. Seeing him awake, she pressed a finger to her lips. He followed the line of her gaze and found Gu Yun fast asleep beside him, his hand resting on Chang Geng's shoulder. His heart skipped a beat as a wave of emotions threatened to overwhelm him.

Chen Qingxu tactfully rolled up her scroll, refilled the incense burner, and curtsied before quietly taking her leave.

In the stillness that followed, the only sound in the room was his lover's shallow breathing. He caught the hand lying against his shoulder, and slowly, slowly interlaced their fingers. He looked at Gu Yun, then removed his glass monocle and carefully dropped a kiss on his lips, featherlight.

This fleeting touch—soft as a dragonfly skimming across water—failed to rouse Gu Yun. Chang Geng gently licked open the seam of Gu Yun's lips and deepened the kiss. Only when he heard Gu Yun's breathing quicken did he finally pull him fully into the circle of his arms, settling him to rest more comfortably.

Gu Yun patted Chang Geng on the back without opening his eyes, comforting him as he always did. "Sleep," he murmured, voice thick with slumber. "I'm here."

Chang Geng closed his eyes and buried his face in the hollow of Gu Yun's throat, perfectly content.

The nightmare was over.

The war, too, drew to a close.

The day the Western forces' letter of surrender arrived in the capital, Shen Yi sent an emergency dispatch to Gu Yun requesting instruction on escorting the prisoners of war into the city.

Gu Yun's reply was succinct: *Giant kite.*

Eleven years ago, Jialai Yinghuo had cast a shadow over Great Liang, infiltrating the northwestern settlement of Yanhui Town aboard a giant kite. That kite was also the starting point of a certain emperor's journey from a small town on the frontier to the distant imperial capital thousands of kilometers away. Now, as the smoke of artillery fire dissipated and the sun broke through the clouds, it seemed apt for everything to end the way it began.

The capital was nothing like the small town of Yanhui. The city lacked the space and means to launch giant kites, so the only option was to leave the city's defense to the Northern Camp and open up a path through the moat that lay beyond the nine gates. To prevent crowds of onlookers from falling into the water, barriers

composed of miniature versions of the iron booms used by the military were erected around viewing areas within the inner city.

The new emperor personally led the ministers of his court out to welcome the airships. At nightfall, an entire flight of giant kites arrived like a flock of geese returning from the south. Tens of thousands of fire pinions rotated in the twilight as the setting sun spilled through the steam, gilding the airships in liquid gold. The roar of engines echoed for kilometers as one by one, the giant kites slipped into the moat like the setting sun melting into the sea and circled around the city.

The kites' commanding officers lined up on their decks and raised their voices in a cry: "Long live Your Majesty!"

Countless lanterns set afloat by spectators drifted thousands of leagues downriver, their flickering glow guiding the souls of the departed back home.

Extra:
Affections from the Deceased

AFTER RETURNING to the capital, Gu Yun took not a single step outside his house for nearly half a year. It wasn't so bad at first: in the early days, he was so physically weak he could neither sit nor stand for long periods of time; drinking a single bowl of medicine would knock him out for an entire day. Yet as winter rolled around and his health improved, Gu Yun found his enforced convalescence increasingly difficult to bear.

When he was neck-deep in work, he had dreamed constantly of spending the entire day in his lover's gentle embrace till his bones melted away. But now that he was finally living out his long-awaited dream, he felt he would go mad with boredom. In his idleness, he resorted to tormenting Old Master Shen's foul-mouthed myna bird for entertainment. The poor creature grew so emaciated under this treatment that it longed to shuffle off its mortal coil.

Perhaps some men were simply born to sleep on hard wooden slats; laying their rough-hewn bodies on a pile of brocade blankets for too long would only give them a backache.

Finally, even His Majesty couldn't stand to watch. As the Winter Solstice approached, he relented and allowed Gu Yun out to attend court.

Today was Gu Yun's day off. He'd been feeling lethargic the past few days and slept poorly the night before. He was a disciplined sleeper and never tossed and turned in bed, but Chang Geng could tell—on sleepless nights, to avoid disturbing him, Gu Yun always instinctively breathed long and soft, such that his breaths were barely audible.

When Chang Geng had asked him about it, he refused to speak, and when pressed, he talked in circles. In any case, if this contrary man didn't wish to discuss something, even a crowbar couldn't pry open his mouth.

Aside from during the New Year's festivities, important ministers of Great Liang's imperial court above a certain rank alternated days off. This precaution ensured there would always be someone to take up the reins in case important matters came up. But although Gu Yun could take a day off, it didn't mean the young emperor, who had snuck out of the palace to sleep in the Marquis Estate, could do the same. With so many new policies in their infancy, Chang Geng had a pile of work that required his attention, and had to hurry back to the palace first thing the next morning.

When he rose, he found Gu Yun also dressed to head out.

"It's so cold today; you ought to wear more layers," Chang Geng said, then asked offhandedly, "Where are you going?"

Gu Yun babbled nonsense with the utmost seriousness. "I'm off to walk my horse in the outskirts."

Chang Geng glanced at the howling northwesterly wind out the window, then looked askance at Gu Yun, whose complexion was still paper-pale from his injury. "Come again?" he asked with a frown.

Gu Yun avoided his gaze, looking at everything but Chang Geng, and refused to discuss the matter any further.

With no time to extract a confession, Chang Geng resorted to shooting Huo Dan a hasty look as he departed. Ever since the guard captain had watched helplessly as His Majesty personally carried his horrifically wounded marquis home, Huo Dan had resolutely turned his coat and become the emperor's spy.

Gu Yun still struggled to see and hear, and so had yet to realize there was a traitor under his own roof. Once Chang Geng was gone, he surreptitiously slipped on an outer robe and instructed the servants to prepare an unremarkable-looking carriage. He took only Huo Dan for company as he headed out.

"My lord, where are we going?" Huo Dan asked, climbing into the driver's seat.

Gu Yun muttered unintelligibly.

"My lord, do you have a toothache?"

The marquis compressed his lips and said no more.

Huo Dan had rarely seen Gu Yun with such an awkward and embarrassed expression. *Could it be that he's going to visit a brothel behind His Majesty's back?* he wondered. But given Gu Yun's grim expression, this didn't seem like any pleasurable excursion.

The two of them stared at each other for more than a moment. Only when the cool breeze from the carriage window doused the flames of the brazier did Gu Yun squeeze three words out between gritted teeth: "The National Temple."

Huo Dan was stunned. *The marquis must have taken the wrong prescription this morning!*

Gu Yun slammed the hanging screen of the carriage shut. "What are you looking at? Let's go!"

Back when they had confronted Jialai Yinghuo for the last time on the northern border, Marshal Gu had vowed to himself that, if there really was a cure for the wu'ergu, he would go burn a stick of incense at the National Temple. Their attempts had been stymied for so long, however, that it had slipped Gu Yun's mind. And while this thankless wretch had indeed been almost entirely sincere back then, as time passed, he soon forgot about his debt to the Buddha.

Yet for some reason, Gu Yun had lately been plagued with a series of strange dreams. He dreamed of a neat row of monks reciting Buddhist scripture at him, their bald heads gleaming as they swayed in unison and chanted "Amitabha Buddha" through the night, leaving him dizzy when he woke up the next morning. After suffering like this for the better part of a week, Gu Yun at last recalled the solemn vow he made and realized why these bald donkeys were haunting him.

So it was that, on his next day off, he reluctantly made his way to the National Temple to burn the promised stick of incense.

The temple was situated high on a mountain. It was an ordinary day during the frigid twelfth month, and few visitors had made the trek. Gu Yun had hurried over first thing in the morning, stealing onto temple grounds like a thief. At this hour, the mountain mist had yet to disperse, and the stone steps were touched with a fine layer of dew. It was a tranquil scene, yet Gu Yun was of no mind to appreciate it as he sprinted up the steps with his head bowed like he was in a rush to be

reincarnated.

Terrified that his master might slip and fall, Huo Dan jogged behind him. The two of them completed the hour-long trek up the mountain path in less than fifteen minutes and arrived at the doors of the Buddhist temple's main hall in no time at all.

Panting from exertion, Huo Dan ventured, "My lord, what are we doing here?"

Twitching with aggravation, Gu Yun ground out, "Burning incense."

Huo Dan gaped. And here he'd been thinking this master of his had stormed in to exact vengeance.

The National Temple's morning recitation had already begun. The main hall was crowded with neatly arranged prayer mats, and a monk dressed in plain vestments sat with his back to the entrance as he struck his wooden fish and silently recited scripture to the tolling of the morning bell.

Gu Yun scanned his surroundings and, seeing that his arrival had gone unnoticed, scurried in without further delay. Pinching his nose, he tossed a handful of copper coins and silver pieces into the merit box before picking up several sticks of incense with a look of utmost disdain. Lighting the lot with a flick of his wrist, he extended his arms, holding the burning incense as far from himself as possible to keep the smoke from drifting into his face.

Gu Yun glanced up at the golden Buddha statue before him, the incense pinched between thumb and forefinger. *Am I supposed to pray to this thing?* he wondered for a bare second before unceremoniously dismissing the notion from his mind. *Fuck that.*

He didn't bother bowing the proper three times but merely gave the statue a curt nod, as if he was already abasing himself for the occasion. Having shown the Buddha sufficient respect, he jabbed the incense into a nearby burner and turned to Huo Dan. "I'm done; let's go."

Huo Dan was speechless. Never had he ever seen someone worship in such an arrogant manner—rather than coming to pray to Buddha, it seemed more accurate to say his marquis was waiting for Buddha to pray to him instead.

After disposing of the incense with all haste, Gu Yun prepared to leave the main hall when the monk who had been hiding to the side striking his wooden fish got to his feet. Turning to Gu Yun with a smile, he bowed and signed, "Marquis Gu, how have you been?"

Gu Yun froze.

He had taken every pain to avoid detection only to run into his smelly archenemy, Liao Ran, in the main hall. This was what he got for leaving the house without checking the divination almanac.[5]

Beaming from ear to ear, Liao Ran signed, "Why has the marquis come to call? Surely you're not here to pray for blessings."

Gu Yun's expression turned slightly queer as he responded, "I'm fulfilling a vow."

"Since the marquis is here to fulfill a vow, why not show a measure of sincerity?" Liao Ran suggested. "Rushing about like this won't do."

A walking misfortune, Gu Yun thought darkly to himself, smiling politely at Liao Ran. “My intentions have been made clear; why insist on formalities? Aren’t you too fixated on outward appearances, Great Master?”

Liao Ran pressed his palms together and bowed once more. “Marshal Gu is wise indeed, worthy of the respect of us Buddhist practitioners. What you say is correct—however, the fact that you remembered to come all this way to fulfill your vow means your intentions were sincere when you prayed to my Buddha. Now that you’ve come, it’s only natural that you should bare your heart.”

Gu Yun said nothing, plastering his fake smile more firmly onto his face.

“It’s cold today—may this humble monk invite the marquis to visit his cell for a cup of tea?” Liao Ran asked.

“I dare not disturb the great master. I’m sure the great master is very busy, so I…uhh… Seeing as I’ve come all this way, I’ll just look around a bit by myself.”

Smiling, Liao Ran bowed one last time before drifting gracefully out of the main hall.

After walking a hundred or so paces, the eminent monk hiked up his robes and tiptoed back to the hall. Craning his neck, he peeked through the doors to see that disrespectful bastard Gu Yun had indeed circled back to the front of the prayer mats. After glaring at the mats with a mutinous expression, he picked up a handful of fresh incense sticks and reluctantly schooled his features into something resembling piety. Even so, one could see his reticence in the unhappy line of his back.

The eminent monk admired Gu Yun’s sullen figure for a spell. Then, quite satisfied, he lifted the hems of his robes and slipped away on long strides.

At home, Gu Yun tossed a handful of evil-dispelling mugwort leaves into his bathwater and scrubbed himself thrice from head to toe before summoning Huo Dan and threatening him. “I know you like to gossip with Chang Geng in your free time, but if you dare breathe a *word* about what happened today, I’ll court-martial you.”

Huo Dan turned mute.

Gu Yun took two steps away, then whirled back, catching Huo Dan’s face twisted halfway between laughter and fear. Startled, Huo Dan tucked away his traitorous grin before turning to flee without a word.

Yet evidently, Marshal Gu’s authority was as absolute as ever—it was many years before Chang Geng figured out exactly what Gu Yun had set out to do that day.

Perhaps because receiving a truly earnest prayer from Gu Yun was such a rare occasion, His Holiness the Buddha decided to grant him a two-in-one deal. The next day, Chen Qingxu came bearing a prescription she’d written on a slip of paper.

“I’ve searched the palace from top to bottom, but I didn’t turn up any clues,” Chen Qingxu said. “I did, however, find something in the record of the goddess’s secret techniques that might be useful for treating deep-rooted poisons, but you must understand, the marshal’s eyes and ears have suffered years of damage. Even if we’re successful in formulating an antidote, it’ll be a long and slow recovery. And I’m afraid…”

I'm afraid a full recovery is already impossible.

"Would you like to give it a try?" Chen Qingxu asked.

Gu Yun glanced at Chang Geng, who seemed to be debating over whether or not to speak. He accepted the slip of paper without hesitation—regardless of whether it worked, if it would set Chang Geng's mind at ease, he didn't mind downing several more vats of medicine.

When he drank this new prescription, he found the scent strangely familiar, though he couldn't recall where he had encountered it. But he didn't think much on it; considering the sheer number of medicines he'd taken over the course of his life, it was unavoidable that he'd repeat an ingredient or two.

Chang Geng, by comparison, was terribly nervous. It took him a full four hours to read through a dozen memorials, and each time a stick of incense burned to its end, he would look up distractedly and ask how Gu Yun felt.

He had taken a single dose of medicine for a chronic illness that had plagued him for decades—what was there to feel?

Gu Yun pacified him with a lie. "I feel much better."

"Better how?" Chang Geng pressed, urgent. "Can you see me without your monocle?"

Gu Yun glanced at Chang Geng and smiled. "I can see every hair on your head with perfect clarity. I imagine I'd be able to see you clearly even if you covered both my eyes."

Hearing this, Chang Geng knew Gu Yun was making things up again. He threw down his brush, preparing to stalk over and have a proper talk with him, when Gu Yun's lips quirked in pure mischief, and he lifted his foot at precisely the right angle to trip His Majesty. Gu Yun's legs were as powerful as ever; caught unawares, Chang Geng lost his balance and pitched forward while that grinning idiot spread his arms wide and waited for Chang Geng to fall into his embrace. Terrified that a grown man's weight might crush Gu Yun to death, Chang Geng broke into a cold sweat and hastily caught himself on the chair's armrests. "Gu Zixi!" he snapped.

With an impish smirk, Gu Yun groped below Chang Geng's waist with one lecherous hand. His brazen touches set Chang Geng's heart aflame, but he didn't dare return them for fear that Gu Yun couldn't bear such strenuous exercise. He grabbed Gu Yun's wrist, dragged his hand out from beneath his robes, and pinned it down beside Gu Yun's head. Gu Yun didn't resist, merely tilting his head to press a kiss to Chang Geng's forearm. "Mm, you smell delicious."

Chang Geng had no idea what to say. "You…"

Gu Yun's expression shifted. "Hold on," he said, twisting his wrist out of Chang Geng's grip.

Chang Geng steadied his footing. "What is it?"

While sexually harassing His Majesty, Gu Yun had inadvertently brushed his nose against the old prayer beads on his own wrist. A thin wisp of fragrance rose from a crack in one of the wooden beads, so faint only dogs and Gu Yun could detect it. It dawned on him then why Chen Qingxu's prescription smelled so familiar—that medicinal fragrance was identical to the faint scent emanating from this string of beads.

Over the years, Gu Yun had lost and found this string of beads on multiple occasions. He'd never paid it much mind, but the little trinket seemed to have grown attached to him. No matter what he experienced, it was always on his person.

Gu Yun slid off the rarely removed beads and twisted them one by one until he reached the largest spacer bead, where his prying fingers found a shallow seam in the surface. With a bright *crack*, the bead broke in two, revealing its contents—astonishingly, a tiny medicinal pill lay nestled inside.

The two of them exchanged a glance. Chang Geng had turned the entire palace upside down looking for anything that might lead to a cure for Gu Yun's affliction. He had never imagined that the true antidote had been attached to Gu Yun's wrist all this time. For eleven years, it had followed him through countless storms, only divulging its secret when Chen Qingxu had found its formula through her own means.

Gu Yun suddenly burst into laughter. He reached out and picked up the pill. "This little thing has the exact same temperament as the late emperor," he said with a smile.

Untimely in cruelty and untimely in kindness…an untimely poison and an untimely antidote.

Your older cousin is watching over you.

Extra:
A Path Called Linyuan

"XIAO-SHIFU!"

The monk Liao Ran looked up to see a little girl, six or seven years of age, stumbling over to him. Her face resembled that of a tabby cat, so streaked was it with dirt and grime, and she carefully held a piece of flatbread, which she offered solemnly to Liao Ran. "Xiao-Shifu, my grandpa told me to give you this. Please eat."

Knowing this was likely food the family had carved out from their own meager rations, Liao Ran dared not accept. He tried to refuse, but he couldn't speak, and the little girl had grown up in the countryside and didn't know sign language or how to read people's faces. She stared at him with wide, confused eyes, shoving that piece of flatbread into Liao Ran's hands.

The flatbread was hard as black iron, but this close, Liao Ran could smell the aroma of flour and oil. His throat bobbed involuntarily. He was only a teenager, and at an age when he was shooting up in height and couldn't bear an empty stomach. He might have shaved his head and become a monk, but it didn't make fasting any easier, and after starving for so many days, his vision had begun to spot black. He was near to cutting off the meat of his cheeks for food. To Liao Ran, that piece of flatbread was an overwhelming temptation, and it was all he could do to desperately recite scriptures to himself to blot out his distracting thoughts.

A terrifying rumble shook the ground as a group of men ran over, armed to the teeth. The dull expressions of the commoners around him twisted in terror.

Jumping to his feet, Liao Ran scooped up the little girl and stuffed her behind him. His nerves were singing, his muscles so tense they ached, but he nevertheless plastered an expression of otherworldly indifference to his face as he slowly pressed his palms together and, ignoring the cold sweat sliding down his back, bowed toward the rebels.

Sure enough, the armor-clad rebels stopped to look at him. Their leader hesitated briefly before returning a sloppy bow and waving to his subordinates. Liao Ran heard him mutter, "Every time this monk reads his scriptures, I feel like I'm being watched by Buddha. It's bad luck; let's come back another day."

The group of men followed their ringleader away in a disorderly column. Once they were certain the rebels had gone, the commoners who'd narrowly escaped disaster snuck over to bow and give thanks to Liao Ran.

Utterly spent, Liao Ran returned their bows before picking up the flatbread that had fallen to the ground and returning it to the terrified girl. As he raised a sleeve to wipe her tears, he glanced down and realized his robes had become so filthy he could no longer tell their original color.

Lowering his hand in embarrassment, he shrugged off his outer robe, flipped it inside out, then pulled it back on. He hoped that, as long as he maintained his ethereal appearance, he could scare off those insurgents just a bit longer. It had been ten days since the rebel army and the government's forces began to clash outside the city. With armored carapaces laying siege outside the walls, supplies were

running critically low. At the same time, the rebels were becoming restless. With no other pastime to take their minds off the stifling atmosphere, these desperados had turned to torturing the city's residents. Thankfully, the present dynasty's embrace of Buddhism had trickled all the way down into the minds of the common folk. Even the most deranged individual still felt a twinge of conscience at the sight of a monk. Liao Ran couldn't speak, but he had been blessed with a pleasing countenance and was naturally imbued with an ethereal aura. As things stood, he could only make full use of this superficial otherworldliness to protect as many as possible.

Liao Ran was fourteen years old that year.

That spring, his shifu, who had wandered off to who knew where, had suddenly returned. He had summoned Liao Ran and spoken cryptically to his youngest and final disciple: "As a child, you often asked this teacher what is encompassed by the words 'all living beings.' Now that you are grown, you may go and see for yourself."

Monks of the National Temple had to be of appropriate age and acquire certain qualifications before they were allowed to step out and travel the world. Liao Ran was the first to go at such a young age, and all the monks of the National Temple said this youngster was blessed with extraordinary wisdom. The mute monk spent more than half a year drifting across the country, begging for alms along the way. He was worshipped by beggars and, thanks to his pretty face, was once nearly stolen away by a female bandit intent on rearing up a young husband. On another occasion, he was dragged off by a crooked landowner who asked him to exorcize the demons haunting his home. Despite these unexpected encounters, the letter he carried with him, personally penned by Liao Ran's shifu Great Master Jueyuan, as well as his official documents from the National Temple, ensured any monasteries he chanced upon would offer a half-grown child like him deferential treatment. On the whole, his travels were fairly safe.

Or so they had been, until he was unluckily caught up in this insurrection.

The newly appointed Min Province Naval Supervisory Commissioner had insisted on making a splash upon assuming office and started by going after a local violet gold smuggling ring. No one had expected that, before he'd even walked a kilometer around the city, the man would uncover a major scandal involving his predecessor turning a blind eye to local officials who'd colluded with the smugglers. He'd dug up a great, sordid mess, yet lacked the ability to clean it up. Under the new commissioner's leadership, the case dragged on, the situation continuing to ferment until, finally, the desperados of Min Province threw caution to the wind. Conspiring with wokou pirates along the East Sea, they formed a rebel army and revolted on the spot.

Acting with surprising coordination, the wokou pirates and rebels captured a number of cities in quick succession. In each new settlement they conquered, they would first execute the local officials before turning the common people out of their homes and plundering their hard-earned savings. The civilians, with nowhere to go, were then rounded up and guarded around the clock, kept as future human shields to shove out before the rebels when the imperial army inevitably came knocking.

Unfortunately for Liao Ran, who had happened to wander in at precisely the wrong moment, he had become a rare specimen—

a human shield with an exceptionally shiny head.

A violent bandit rebellion was nothing like a civil uprising. Dissatisfied commoners might devolve into mob violence, but most civil insurgents hailed from poor families and wouldn't deliberately resort to cruelty unless they completely lost their heads. These violet gold smugglers were an entirely different breed, to whom ordinary human morality didn't apply.

Liao Ran had lost track of how long he'd been trapped in this city. Heart heavy with worry, he crouched down and patted the little girl, who was hiccupping from sobbing so hard. He begged a bowl of water, swallowed his saliva, and soaked the flatbread until it softened before feeding it to the child one bite at a time.

"Xiao-Shifu, when will someone come to save us?"

Liao Ran's brows twitched, but before he could respond, a man spoke up beside him. "Save us? Ay, child, stop dreaming. Just wait for death."

The Yuanhe Emperor had for years neglected the military in favor of the literary arts. Perhaps he was sick in the head: after defeating the northern barbarians, he claimed further military conquest would offend the heavens and began to quietly undermine the military officials of his imperial court. Following the deaths of the Marquis of Anding, Gu Shen, and the eldest princess, the venerable old emperor grew ever more extreme, going so far as to set aside the nation's most powerful weapon, the Black Iron Battalion. The court's loyal generals grew old or passed away one after another, and there were few capable leaders to be had.

Shortly after the start of the rebellion, the court sent a useless loafer at the head of the imperial army. The moment he arrived, he first charged directly into the wokou pirates' ambush, then angered the leader of the local rebels. In the end, he succeeded only in demonstrating to the rebel troops the feebleness of the central government and inspiring them to use the people as human shields.

At this point, the court finally realized the situation had spiraled out of control—but the next general they sent was another hopeless case. The leader of the troops presently besieging the city was surnamed Gu, but regardless of his family background, the boy was only fifteen years old. He appeared neither preternaturally gifted nor possessed of any miraculous abilities.

In fact, those who were lucky enough to survive the two armies' initial clash could still picture the sheer terror on the boy-general's face when he beheld the raggedly dressed human shields. His horrified eyes had said it all: not only was this young general a mere child, he had likely never seen a drop of shed blood.

In his panic, he'd lost control of his troops' formation and fallen right into the rebels' trap. If not for the timely arrival of reinforcements, his entire army would now be food for crows. Clearly, he wasn't to be relied upon.

Liao Ran sighed to himself, forlorn. It seemed this city was to be his grave.

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In the eyes of this eminent young monk, his present situation was the epitome of worldly suffering. Yet Buddhist doctrines presented no obvious path to escaping it. He was like a clay Buddha trying to cross a river: he could barely ensure his own safe passage, much less carry anyone else to the opposite shore.

Bored stiff, Liao Ran leaned against the wall and stared into space. He couldn't help recalling his more peaceful days at the National Temple.

Liao Ran had been an abandoned infant picked up by Great Master Jueyuan, the former abbot of the National Temple, during his travels. The child's background was unknown, and he was mute from birth, so he could neither study for the imperial examinations and become a government official nor learn martial arts and join the military. Great Master Jueyuan, however, felt that this child had a fated connection with Buddhism. He thus took him in as his final disciple.

During the reign of the Yuanhe Emperor, aside from the nobles, those who lived most comfortably were no doubt the monks. His Majesty was a devout Buddhist himself, and people at all levels of society naturally followed the example of their sovereign, chanting sutras and praying to Buddha when they had nothing better to do. During the New Year holiday, married women and young ladies alike would line up at their local temples to generously loosen their purse strings and burn incense… In this, these desperados were no different. Although their reverence didn't extend to sparing him from use as a human shield, neither did they outright humiliate him.

The National Temple was the foremost Buddhist temple in Great Liang. Though its most eminent monks held no official positions, their influence surpassed that of the emperor's closest ministers, and they were frequently seen going to and from the palace. After accepting Liao Ran as his disciple, Great Master Jueyuan had retired from his position as abbot and passed the title to his senior disciple, Liao Chi. Then he had left the monastery, often traveling for years at a time. Liao Ran rarely saw his shifu and spent the majority of his time in the care of his shixiong, who looked after his basic needs and commenced his education in the Buddhist scriptures.

His shixiong might have been considered handsome in his younger days, if not for his dour expression and the fact that he rarely smiled. The corners of his mouth and the space between his brows were always tightly creased, as though he had never relaxed in his life. Sometimes, Liao Chi-shixiong would go and personally wipe down the Buddha statue or meditate by himself in the main hall in the dead of night. Though little Liao Ran didn't understand why he did this, he clumsily imitated his motions.

When Liao Chi picked up a big bucket of water to go clean the Buddha, Liao Ran would follow, filling his little pail with water and clambering onto the incense burner table to scrub down His Holiness's feet.

When Liao Chi sat in the shadow of the Buddha in silent meditation, little Liao Ran would drag over his own prayer mat and sit beside him. Many nights, when he grew tired, he slumped drowsily against Liao Chi-shixiong or fell right off of his little prayer mat. And each time, Liao Ran would wipe his drool and muzzily right himself, waiting for his shixiong to lead him back to bed.

Liao Chi was naturally taciturn, and Liao Ran couldn't speak even if he wanted to. When this odd shixiong-shidi pair sat together, their interactions were the opposite of lively—but even so, they were each other's small worlds. When Liao Ran fell asleep, Liao Chi-shixiong picked him up and carried him back to his room. During the bitter cold of winter, he shooed Liao Ran back inside and told him to put on a quilted jacket; he even helped Liao Ran wipe his dripping nose with his usual impassive expression. Liao Ran was like a tiny creature trembling with fear

and trepidation. There was no need to beckon him; he revolved always around his shixiong, as if dependent on him for everything. He dared not stray a step and regarded his shixiong as the pillar holding up his world.

But all children grew up.

Eventually, that bald little boy whom his shifu could once lift with a single hand grew into a handsome youth who became more charming by the day. He became, too, increasingly restless. He was no longer his shixiong's tag-along and could no longer be satisfied spending his days sounding bells and reading scripture in the temple. He wanted to see the world. Each time a monk hailing from distant lands came to stay at the National Temple, Liao Ran crept over and listened to their stories with a desperate thirst.

His shixiong said a monk ought to maintain clarity of the senses and mind; he found such restlessness inappropriate. Day after day, Liao Ran squashed down his desire to partake in secular affairs. He felt vaguely that his senses and mind weren't all that clear, and that his fated connection to Buddha was rather weak. When he finally obtained his venerable old master's permission, Liao Ran practically fled the National Temple in his impatience to be gone. It was Liao Chi-shixiong who helped him pack his bag and walked him the long way to the capital's outskirts.

Over the previous ten years, Liao Chi had been both father and elder brother to him. He looked on as Liao Ran walked toward the fathomless secular world beyond the monastery, offering him bits and pieces of cautionary advice and instructions with every step.

Liao Ran had found him tediously long-winded then. But now, as he faced imminent danger, he felt lost. *If Shixiong knew I was here, would he worry?* he wondered.

As daylight grayed to darkness, Liao Ran curled up with his listless fellow human shields and turned his prayer beads one by one. He pretended to recite scripture, but in reality, he felt a deep pessimism. He had sent his shixiong a letter at the previous relay station just before turning into a bald-headed human shield. In all likelihood, that letter would reach the temple alongside news of his death.

When the time came, would Shixiong recite the *Rebirth Mantra* for him?

Would he cry?

Or would he remain indifferent to worldly concerns and wish his shidi a speedy trip to paradise?

As Liao Ran thought, another depressing notion came to him: *I haven't been earnest in my self-cultivation, nor have I accumulated any merits. If I die, will I even go to paradise?*

A monk was about to die a senseless death in the midst of a bloody rebellion. Liao Ran's heart sank. He realized it didn't matter even if he had converted. But perhaps he should do his best regardless of what fate had in store for him—Liao Ran made a last-ditch effort to throw himself at Buddha's feet and started reciting his scriptures in earnest.

Yet just as he began to lose himself in the calming rhythm of the Sanskrit, he jolted at the sound of approaching footsteps. Liao Ran opened his eyes to find several rebels brushing past as they headed toward the thatched hut behind him.

This hut had been pieced together as a shelter for the women, children, elderly, and infirm among the hostages. Before Liao Ran could make sense of what he'd seen, he heard a man beside him: "Those bastards!"

The man's companion hastily pulled him back, covering his mouth to keep him from saying any more.

Comprehension dawned. A wave of anger washed over Liao Ran. As he watched, one of the rebels turned and walked back toward him. Avoiding the young monk's furious gaze, he dug through his pockets and pulled out a fragrant oilpaper packet, which he placed before Liao Ran on the ground. "This is made with vegetable oil," he said quietly. "Please eat, Shifu."

The rebel scratched his head, then pressed his palms together and bowed politely. "Amitabha Buddha," he said before running off to join his companions in the realm of beasts. [6]

Liao Ran stared at the packet of pastries. In that moment, he had no idea how he ought to react. An unspeakably wicked and violent rebel was about to slake his animalistic desires on the innocent, but along the way, he offered up a stray prayer to Buddha.

Does he seek protection from Buddha too? Does he wish Buddha to grant him salvation too?

Shifu, what is encompassed by "all living beings"?

Where do all living beings go?

A burst of youthful impulse seized Liao Ran, and he jumped to his feet. Cries of alarm rose around him as he sprinted after the man.

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Rationally, Liao Ran knew he lacked the strength to resist these rebels. But his mind was filled with a single thought: *I'll stop them if it's the last thing I do.*

He picked up a rock and launched toward the thatched hut, the uneven surface of his makeshift weapon scraping his palms raw. Save for one man left to stand guard by the door with his back to Liao Ran, all the rebels had piled into the small hut.

Chest heaving, Liao Ran stared at the back of the guard's head, prepared to commit the sin of murder.

Yet even the average person would have difficulty killing their fellow man, never mind a monk like Liao Ran. His mind was an uproarious clamor, his soul on the verge of tearing in half. Just as he painfully resolved himself and hefted the rock high for a fatal downward swing, his would-be victim crumpled.

Liao Ran stared.

He looked up in shock, his weapon still raised like a complete idiot, to see a girl around his own age standing before him with a handful of silver needles and a placid expression. Through some art or magic, she had knocked out all the rebels, who were now lying—dead or simply unconscious, Liao Ran couldn't guess—strewn upon the ground.

The girl met his gaze, her eyes flitting up and down over his Buddhist robes and bald head. “I heard there’s a little monk from the National Temple trapped here,” she said in cool tones. “Is that you?”

Liao Ran opened his mouth but could make no sound, staring at the young woman like a fool. But the girl didn’t grow impatient. After a moment of consideration, she said, “I’m from the Chen family of Taiyuan. Are you a disciple of Grand Master Jueyuan?”

Liao Ran nodded, confused. The girl arched a brow and frowned. “Forget it—just come with me.”

Liao Ran followed in a daze as she entered the hut, where they encountered an anxious, scholarly-looking young man. “Is everything all right?” he asked.

“I took care of it,” the young girl said blandly, then pointed at Liao Ran. “This little monk is from the National Temple. Little monk, this is Lord Yao.”

“I’m no lord,” the young man hastily amended. “I’ve been idling away my days at home of late. I’m merely an ordinary citizen—”

“Very well,” the girl said over him, “Young Master Yao then. Where did that general go? Has he already left?”

“Yes.” Young Master Yao lowered his voice. “General Gu said all the arrangements have been made. However…”

“What is it?”

Young Master Yao hesitated. “When chaos breaks out, I’m afraid the city’s residents will panic. People will get hurt. General Gu is concerned about this as well. It would be best if we had some way to gather everyone in one spot—but doing so will alert the enemy. And…the people here have been abused by the rebels. They’re a flock of terrified birds ready to take flight at the twang of the bow. How do we get them to land on the same tree?”

Both lapsed into silence. Liao Ran had no idea where this Chen family girl acquired her skills, but while she could fell a man and lay an ambush, it seemed she had no idea how to go about organizing a group of civilians.

It was the mute monk, watching quietly the entire time, who weakly reached out and signed, “I… I can try.”

***

So went the first hasty encounter between the future Marquis of Order, two core members of the Linyuan Pavilion, and the governor of Liangjiang, Yao Zhen.

That year, the Marquis of Anding was still a half-grown child who felt fear as he rode into battle. Governor Yao of Liangjiang was a penniless scholar who had been dismissed from his post and returned home in disgrace. Great Master Liao Ran had yet to grow into the personification of a freshwater lotus—if anything, in his current state, he most closely resembled a green foxtail. As for Chen Qingxu, she was but an impetuous girl who knew only how to charge headfirst into trouble.

Liao Ran, Chen Qingxu, and Yao Zhen made quick work of hiding the rebels’ bodies before deciding on a time and signal. They left the hut and went their

separate ways.

The next evening, residents of the city found a stream of people headed in one direction.

The mute young monk had somehow gotten his hands on a basin of water and carefully washed himself clean. Bathed in the rays of the setting sun, with his prayer beads in hand and his eyes closed, his lips moved through the words of Buddhist scriptures as he sat atop a boulder. A large crowd knelt around him—the whole group, of course, arranged by Young Master Yao.

When in the depths of despair, it was natural to cling to faith. Just as planned, the terrified citizens were led, little by little, to gather around the boulder. The braver ones knelt at its base while others hid behind nearby trees or around corners to watch in secret.

The rebels paid these feeble human shields no attention at first. Some watched the bustling scene with amusement. Others joined in, seizing the opportunity to bathe in the aura of Buddha and pray for protection, wishing fervently for those government dogs beyond the city walls to evaporate overnight.

By the time the rebels came to their senses, the sun was sinking below the horizon. Liao Ran's gleaming head had drawn most denizens of the city over to the rock. Hidden in the crowd, Miss Chen palmed a needle and crouched low, reaching for a dagger strapped to the leg of her trousers.

"Step aside!" Realizing at last that something was wrong, a minor rebel leader drew his sword and leveled it at the crowd. "Get back! Scram! No gatherings!"

A shiver ran down Liao Ran's spine as he snuck a look at Miss Chen. Young Master Yao wasn't on the scene, and the monk had no idea whether this vicious young woman had steeled herself to murder all these rebels single-handedly. Her little face seemed covered in a layer of frost, making it impossible to discern her thoughts. Surrounded by defenseless civilians and with no idea when the government troops would arrive, two half-grown children prepared to face off against a band of murderous rebels.

Liao Ran felt his heart was about to leap out of his chest. *Do something*, he thought frantically to himself. *I have to do something.*

The rebel leader brandished his sword at a tottering old woman. "Get *back* I said. Guards—"

Alarmed, Chen Qingxu drew her dagger and swept through the crowd like a blast of wind to parry the rebel leader's blade with her own. Every muscle in her body was wound tight, tense as a chopstick about to snap.

A sharp whistle sounded through the city. The rebels who had peacefully joined the crowd snapped back to attention and turned on the citizens around them. Screams split the air as the scene erupted into chaos. Chen Qingxu met the rebel leader's sword with her dagger, but after three ringing strikes, her short blade snapped in two with a sharp *crack*.

The various deities and Buddhas stood across the sea of blood, too far away to help. There was only Liao Ran, who lurched to his feet.

At that moment, an iron arrow trailing white steam streaked through the air and embedded itself in the rebel's throat, spattering Miss Chen with blood. She

collapsed back into the dirt, a look of bewilderment on her face. Liao Ran, rushing over, found his path blocked by the panicking crowd. In the distance, Young Master Yao shouted, “The imperial army has arrived! Citizens, out of the way! The rebel commander is dead—any who resist will be executed on the spot!”

The thunder of hoofbeats on flagstones followed his words. The civilians who had been scattering in all directions parted at once, shoving to the sides of the road to make way.

“Xiao-Shifu, look out!” A pair of civilian men seized Liao Ran, one at the collar and one at the sleeve, and dragged him out of the way as the hastily assembled rebel army poured out of the alleyways.

Young Master Yao continued his disinformation campaign: “The rebel commander is dead…”

A burly man as tall as an iron tower stepped out of the rebel crowd and bellowed, “Fuck off! Like hell I’m dead! Brothers, we destroyed the drawbridge at the city gates. The wicked emperor’s army cannot enter—some traitorous rat has merely allowed a handful of monkeys in! Hurry up and slaughter them!”

Miss Chen brushed cold sweat from her forehead, clutching her last needle as she snatched a wooden staff from the middle-aged man beside her, prepared to fight to the death.

But before she could take her first step forward, a team of cavalrymen was storming through like a whirlwind. The soldier riding at the fore shouted, “Get out of the way—”

It was a miracle Miss Chen wasn’t knocked off her feet.

“Chop them to pieces!” the rebel commander howled.

He was still howling when the team of eight or nine light-pelt cavalrymen reached him. Miss Chen sprang forward, but before she could strike, the boy-general leading the charge swung his saber in a wide arc with an explosive burst of steam. His unarmored face, fair and soft with immaturity, was on full display for all to see.

His warhorse carried a particularly light burden, and he shot ahead of the rest of the cavalry, fearlessly charging into the enemy’s formation alone. Three men fell with a swing of his blade, soaking his dark robes with steaming blood. His warhorse whinnied, and a fourth rebel, helpless before him, quailed without even lifting his sword. He fled in a panic as the boy-general swiftly closed in. Seeing his men’s morale shrinking before his eyes, the rebel commander lopped off the deserter’s head himself with a great shout before lifting his sword and charging forward to engage the enemy at close quarters.

“All archers, fire!” the rebel commander roared.

As though waking from a dream, the rebel troops nocked their arrows one by one and turned toward the clustered street, aiming at civilians and cavalry alike. Liao Ran’s heart caught in his throat.

The boy-general was unfazed; the instant his enemy issued these orders, he stood up on his saddle and released his horse’s reins. In so small a space, with his entire body wreathed in the steam hissing from his saber, he seemed practically otherworldly. Like a flash, he parried the rebel commander’s sword and leapt off of his warhorse.

The rebel commander never expected his opponent to be so reckless; the steam-powered blade bit into his shoulder before he could react. Saber a blur in the youth's slender hands, the weapon issued a monstrous roar as it sliced cleanly through the rebel leader and his steed in a single long swing. So swift was the boy's strike that the horse had yet to topple as he jumped back.

The blade of the steam-powered saber curled from the impact, its heavy pommel screeching in protest. Unending clouds of steam parted, revealing the boy-general's youthful face.

After today, no one would say he had never seen a drop of shed blood.

The boy's eyes blazed with murderous intent as he lobbed his damaged weapon at one of the rebel archers, knocking the arrow out of the sky the moment it left the string. The rest of the imperial cavalry galloped over, forming a defensive circle around their spirited young general. Steps away, the body of the rebel commander swayed slightly before finally falling with a loud *thud*. The boy-general plucked a new blade from the hands of his personal guard as he rode past.

"The rebel commander is dead," he declared. "Surrender now, or be executed without exception."

Great Liang cavalry streamed into the city. The rebels were a headless snake—without leadership, they suffered defeat after defeat. Liao Ran watched as a young man dressed in rags climbed onto the boulder on which he had recited his scriptures. He raised an iron arrow he had picked up somewhere aloft like a spear and cried out, "My fellow citizens, our vengeance is nigh—what are you waiting for?!"

At his rallying cry, every citizen who still had strength to lift a weapon charged forth in a righteous wave.

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The rebel army suffered a resounding defeat, and the scattered remains of their troops fled in a panic. The armored cavalry vanguard led by Gu Yun chased them down while a small team of heavy-armor infantrymen stayed behind to maintain order in the city.

To Liao Ran's surprise, the Chen girl was versed in medicine as well as martial arts. She was decisive in her use of medication and bound wounds with a practiced hand. Liao Ran could neither ride a horse nor kill a man, so he followed at her heels as she ran errands and tended the casualties.

Five days later, the newly appointed local official arrived. The citizens who had endured all manner of horrors could finally settle down. Young Master Yao stayed behind to offer his help, while Miss Chen shouldered her pack and bid Liao Ran farewell.

After staring death in the eye together, the two had grown familiar. Brow knit with worry, Liao Ran signed, "Apparently the rebel army has fled south. The stragglers have yet to be eliminated, so please take care during your travels."

In the time they'd spent tending to the wounded, Miss Chen had come to understand more and more of Liao Ran's sign language. She smiled slightly. "Many thanks for your concern, Xiao-Shifu. Even so, I must go where I am needed."

She was neither an ignorant child nor an eligible maiden, but was rather at the most tender and lovable age for a daughter. She ought to have been at home, showered in affection. Liao Ran couldn't imagine what her upbringing was like that her family could bear to send her out to weather the trials and tribulations of the jianghu.

"My brother has a weak constitution, so my dad said I might very well become the head of our family in the future." In those days, the young Miss Chen had yet to become so solemn. She rarely encountered people her own age and couldn't resist showing off a little. "He also told me I mustn't be afraid of anything. The more treacherous the road, the better for finding my path."

Liao Ran couldn't help the look of skepticism that flickered over his face. "And what is your path?" he signed somewhat clumsily.

"When times are prosperous, we are content to till the land, to study our books, and to roam the depths of the jianghu," Miss Chen declared with the firm resolution and artless naivete of a girl who understood only half of what she said. "When chaos is imminent and the abyss looms near, we shall die a thousand deaths to save the people. This path is called 'Linyuan'—to approach the abyss. Well then, I'm off!"

Liao Ran watched her drift away into the distance until a voice called out to him, pulling him away from his thoughts.

"Xiao-Shifu! There's someone looking for you!"

Liao Ran turned. His eyes grew round with shock.

The newcomer was coated in the dust of the road—he had obviously come with all haste and without stopping to rest, so travelworn he resembled a wandering monk. It was his shixiong, Liao Chi. Liao Chi gazed at Liao Ran across the distance, his melancholy face revealing a hint of relief before returning to its habitual state of indifference. Lifting a hand, he beckoned Liao Ran over.

Liao Ran seemed to transform into a tiny lost animal that had found its way back to its pack. Abandoning the mask of holy eminence he had forced himself to don these past days, he bounded over to Liao Chi, grinning like an idiot. He tugged on his shixiong's sleeve and signed, "What is Shixiong doing here?"

Liao Chi glanced at his shidi's filth-streaked face and shook his head in exasperation.

Only then did Liao Ran realize his shixiong hadn't come alone. A number of people stood behind him, imposing in stature and clad in light-pelt armor with weapons strapped to their waists—soldiers borrowed from some nearby garrison.

Liao Chi frowned. "I shouldn't have listened to Shifu and allowed you to leave the temple at such a young age."

Liao Ran hesitated, examining Liao Chi's face as he lifted his hands to sign.

"No," Liao Chi didn't glance at his hands as he cut him off. "You may ask me about leaving the temple again in a few years' time."

Liao Ran followed silently in his wake, not daring to make a sound. Finally, after resisting as long as he could, he couldn't stand it and signed, "How many years? Shixiong has been in the capital so long—don't you want to see the world?"

"There's nothing worth seeing," Liao Chi said blandly. "I've seen it all."

Liao Ran flushed with indignation at his ridiculous boast. “A monk does not tell lies. The world is vast and filled with many joys and sorrows. Every living creature has a thousand states of being; each person has their particular likes and dislikes. Shixiong barely leaves the National Temple—how can you say you’ve seen it all?”

Liao Chi patted him on the head and said no more.

Many years later, standing amidst the thunder of cannon fire, Liao Ran would finally glimpse what his shixiong had meant when he said he’d seen it all.

***

A year later, Great Master Jueyuan passed away.

His eldest disciple Liao Chi was mature and wise; he was the natural successor to his master. It was not he, however, who sat by the bedside of the most eminent monk of his generation and accompanied him through the final days of his mortal journey.

After sitting beside Great Master Jueyuan for the entire day, Liao Ran finally stepped out into the hallway. Palms pressed together, he bowed deeply to his fellow disciples waiting by the door and signed, “Shifu has passed on.”

The great bell of the National Temple tolled, low and mournful, as the smoke from thousands of sticks of incense curled up to the heavens. Liao Ran’s shixiong became the most eminent monk of a new generation. Yet Liao Ran had no time to join them. He returned to his cell and took out a tiny piece of wood.

Lin…yuan.

***

“Shifu, you say our Buddha will grant salvation to all living beings, but what is encompassed by all living beings?”

“Amitabha Buddha. Lowly commoners and lofty nobles, men and women, the old and the young, even the birds and the beasts, the flowers and their leaves, and the grasses and the trees—all things that feel sentiment and desire, fear and hatred, within every breath, and express them in every movement—all of these are living beings.”

“Then, what about me? And Shifu and Buddha? Do we count as living beings?”

Extra:
On Romance

COMPARED TO HIS PREDECESSOR, the late Longan Emperor Li Feng, it could be said that Li Min had a better grasp on the pace of political change as a ruler. The reforms he implemented came wave after thunderous wave, but all were handled in an orderly manner: decrees were followed by policies, which were gradually implemented first among the upper echelons of society before trickling steadily down to the common folk. He opened new schools to educate the masses and sent dragon warships on long voyages overseas to escort merchant vessels and talented scholars seeking an education abroad, quietly disentangling sovereign powers that had been centralized since the days of Emperor Wu from the convoluted snarl of the imperial court.

But though Li Min was diligent in governance and never ostentatious, he did not follow the lead of his elder brother in denying himself comfort.

Every year, when the weather grew hot, it was his habit to lead the ministers of the court to the reconstructed Sunlight Palace to escape the heat. Likewise, nothing could stop His Majesty from ending every New Year's banquet early and running off to the hot spring villa in the northern outskirts to soak in peace.

But in the first year of Taishi, the ministers of the court had yet to acclimate to the new emperor's personal habits. There were therefore several instances in which His Majesty was disturbed during his sacred hot spring getaway.

The most irritating and persistent of these disturbances was Shen Yi.

On the fifth day of the first month in the first year of His Majesty's reign, Shen Yi escorted the war reparations back to the capital and reported on the particulars of his mission. Assuming Gu Yun and Chang Geng had by now had their fill of necking, and that he wouldn't be egregiously out of turn in paying them a New Year's visit, he picked up several jars of his dad's personal vintage and headed off for the northern outskirts.

Old Master Shen had little to fill his days with at home and spent the majority of his time tinkering with this and that. On one occasion, he made too much wine and, with no place to store it, consigned the excess to Southward Tower to be sold. To everyone's astonishment, the two giant cartloads of moonshine sold out in three days. Old Master Shen's personal vintage became so popular it was well-nigh impossible to procure a single drop. When the old man heard, it went to his head. He refused to mass-produce his wine, making only two or three jars per batch, which he gifted to friends and family. In his idle moments, he convinced scholars to write stories in the local papers about his winemaking escapades, going out of his way to ensure everyone knew about this rare and unattainable wine—a despicable move, to be sure.

In the end, even the simple little jars used to store the Shen family vintage became a coveted item in the capital. By the same token, Old Master Shen's wine became a highly respectable gift, allowing the impoverished Shen Yi an easy way to deal in favors.

Unfortunately, in this instance, the famous vintage passed only briefly through Gu Yun's hands before it was ruthlessly confiscated by His Majesty. "I'll have someone warm this up for you," Chang Geng said, gently but firmly tugging the wine jar away.

Taking in Gu Yun's aggrieved expression, Shen Yi was perplexed. He elbowed him once Chang Geng was gone. "What business do you have pulling a long face when the sovereign of our nation takes such good care of you?"

Gu Yun looked as if his stomach ached. He slanted a glance at Shen Yi, then waved a listless hand. "The hell do you know."

Shen Yi had gathered himself to return fire when he remembered he came to seek Gu Yun's advice. It wouldn't do to offend him before asking, so he checked his temper and lowered his voice. "Zixi, there's something I want to ask you about."

"Speak," Gu Yun muttered.

Shen Yi's throat worked, his expression turning deadly earnest. "I want to propose marriage to Miss Chen, but—I worry I'll seem too presumptuous."

Gu Yun's eyebrow shot toward his hairline. "Presumptuous? What do you mean, presumptuous?"

Shen Yi went mute.

"You've already given her a token of affection, haven't you?" Gu Yun continued, baffled.

Hanging his head, Shen Yi rummaged through his pockets and pulled out a tiny cloth pouch wrapped in a length of silk. As Gu Yun looked on in astonishment, he unwound the tight parcel to reveal the contents hidden beneath a full three layers of silk—that hair ornament of legend.

"You *still* haven't given this to her?" Gu Yun gave his ruthless evaluation: "Well, thank goodness for that—it's hideous."

Shen Yi clutched at his heart in silence.

Gu Yun continued his scathing appraisal: "Agonizing over your decision for so long only to choose such a dowdy old thing—honestly, anyone who doesn't know better would think it's an offering for your mother. Besides, it's obvious Miss Chen doesn't prefer cumbersome stuff like pearls and jade. A pointless purchase."

While Shen Yi could just barely humble himself to accept the first half of Gu Yun's spiel, the second half gave him pause. "How do *you* know what she prefers?" he asked, wary.

Gu Yun beckoned him closer. "Unless she is truly too poor to afford it, a woman will most certainly buy what she likes herself," Gu Yun said with perfect sincerity. "Don't tell me you think she would agonize over something like this all day long with the expectation that someone, someday, might read her mind and buy it for her?" Leaning back, Gu Yun regarded him with pity. "You're totally overthinking this," he sighed, shaking his head.

Shen Yi could muster no response.

Generally, Gu Yun took great pleasure in bullying Shen Yi, but seeing his timid demeanor now, he felt a rare pang of sympathy. He picked up a hot-spring egg from a tray at his side and cracked it open, offering the morsel to Shen Yi.

Thinking back on it, Gu Yun realized Shen Yi and Miss Chen had gone their separate ways after offing Jialai Yinghuo. Chen Qingxu had returned briefly to the Chen family estate before hurrying back to the capital to tend to Chang Geng. Meanwhile, Shen Yi had remained on the northern border until Gu Yun transferred him to Jiangnan. The pair had been sent to opposite ends of the earth and had only just managed to catch their breath in the last few months. It could be assumed they'd barely had the opportunity to speak to each other.

Shen Yi, that useless idiot. He'd survived a brush with death with Chen Qingxu then let his chance slip through his fingers. If not for Miss Chen's naturally standoffish demeanor, he could never have afforded to dither as long as he had.

Torn between pity at Shen Yi's misfortune and exasperation at his cowardice, Gu Yun offered up his earnest guidance. "Even if you say it to yourself a hundred times, it's all pointless if you don't tell her. Never mind whether she accepts you or not—you have to tell her how you feel first, right?"

"I…never know what to say when I see her," Shen Yi said in a pained voice.

Gu Yun cut straight to the point. "Given how skilled you are at rambling at everyone else, there can only be one reason you don't know what to say to her: you're too focused on your objective. You feel you have ulterior motives and are afraid of overstepping, so you become overly cautious and lose your nerve."

Shen Yi was never short of criticism when it came to Gu Yun's own degeneracy, but in this moment, he couldn't help but nod, wholly convinced. "Makes sense."

"You're approaching this entirely the wrong way," Gu Yun continued with the confidence of ample experience. "If you want to skillfully navigate this situation, you must first show no fear. Regard her as any other person; don't worship her like Buddha. Talk to her as you would anyone else. Now on the other hand, Miss Chen thinks of nothing but medicine year-round and has a mild temperament… In other words, she might be a little slow on the uptake. You must also ensure that she sees how you treat her differently from everyone else. It's a subtle thing: do too little and she'll never realize your feelings; too much, and you risk appearing vulgar."

When Chang Geng returned, he had swapped the large wine jar for a small bottle. He directed his attendants to bring out a portable stove to warm the wine before dismissing them again, then stood to the side, listening to Gu Yun expound on the intricacies of romance with a faint smile. As for the two he watched, one was putting his all into showing off while the other was diligently studying the former's ways; neither noticed His Majesty's return.

"Please teach me, Marshal," Shen Yi implored.

"This isn't something I can teach—I've never encountered this problem myself," Gu Yun said, all seriousness. "See how handsome and confident I am. No matter what I do, girls never find me vulgar."

Shen Yi stared.

"It doesn't matter how long you stare at me, it's no good," Gu Yun said. "Besides, this is something you must grasp intuitively; it can't be conveyed in words. There's no way you'll get it if I only tell you."

Shen Yi stifled his sudden urge to beat this man to death and squeezed out, "In that case, how about something more practical? Give me an example—for

instance?"

Gu Yun considered a moment. "For instance, for a man like you, who's getting along in age…"

"Excuse me?!" Shen Yi fumed.

"Tsk, for a mature man like you—*mature*, okay?" Gu Yun disdainfully corrected himself. "Don't talk about love like some green lad. Women will think you're unreliable. When it comes to sweet nothings, quality is more important than quantity. Ideally, you should slip in a few tender words between a hundred lines of serious talk. Touch her heart without seeming too frivolous."

He was finally speaking like a person with sense. Shen Yi nodded along.

"There's a trick to interspersing such lines throughout your speech," Gu Yun continued. "Before putting it into practice, prepare a mental outline. You have to deliver them calmly and without batting an eye, while making sure it sounds natural in the flow of conversation. When you're just getting started, it's best not to say anything too bold. Know when to stop and where to draw the line. Make sure she's amenable to your attention before discreetly pushing your luck when the opportunity arises."

Eavesdropping from the sidelines, the emperor folded his arms and nodded along as well. He now had a decent idea of how Gu Yun had used this method on him in the past.

"However," Gu Yun went on, "even if you're coy in your speech, you must be sure to please her in all other ways that matter. For instance, consider her feelings and look after her comfort at all times. Follow her pace and preferences, and choose your words and actions accordingly. For this, you must observe—preferably with your own eyes and not by asking her directly. This shows sincere interest. Also…oh, it's also important to look at her the right way."

Shen Yi dearly wished he could go grab a brush and paper, that he might write down the Marquis of Anding's golden precepts word for word. He hastened to ask, "How should I look at her…"

He glanced up and met Gu Yun's eyes.

Usually, when Gu Yun looked at him, his eyes seemed to say, "Out of the way, you're blocking my light." But at this moment, they seemed to say, "You *are* my light."

Gu Yun's gaze carefully straddled the line between rapt attention and dreamy daze. The corners of his eyes curved gently with the promise of a smile. It was as if he had eyes for nothing but the one before him—yet at the same time, there was an irrepressible wildness to his gaze. His lashes fluttered, as if suddenly caught out, and he lowered his eyes, naturally affecting a slight awkwardness as he reached up to rub lightly at his nose with a grin.

Shen Yi nearly dropped his half-eaten egg on the ground.

Chang Geng couldn't bear to watch any longer. He strode over, coughing loudly. Gu Yun promptly lowered the leg he had propped up on the little side table and rearranged himself into the shape of a proper gentleman.

Inexplicably self-conscious, Shen Yi jumped to his feet. "Your Majesty."

Chang Geng softened his fake smile into his customary gentle expression. "No need for such courtesies in private," he said with a wave of the hand. "Please

sit, General Shen."

Shen Yi had the distinct impression it was time he made himself scarce.

Chang Geng smiled. "I happened to overhear a few words just now—did you come to ask after Miss Chen?"

This question only magnified Shen Yi's discomfort.

"Actually, I heard Miss Chen has greatly admired General Shen since the battle on the northern border," Chang Geng said to the crimson-faced Shen Yi. He calmly set the little bottle of wine on the stove to warm it, slapping aside Gu Yun's reaching hand without even looking. "If your feelings are requited, there's no need for such careful probing. Just the other day I found some rare medical texts in the palace. I was planning on sending someone to deliver them to Miss Chen—perhaps General Shen would like to help me with this errand?"

Shen Yi nearly fell to his knees before His Majesty. Chang Geng's handful of words seemed far more valuable than Gu Yun's long-winded speech.

Within the time a stick of incense took to burn, Chang Geng watched in satisfaction as Shen Yi floated out the door. In truth, the one who most longed for Shen Yi to hurry and find a wife was the emperor himself, if only so this man would stop hanging around Gu Yun night and day. For as long as Chang Geng had known them, the two had practically been joined at the hip. Gu Yun might not tell Chang Geng when he met with difficulties, but he always confided in Shen Yi…and while there were several perfectly good reasons for this, it was impossible for Chang Geng to be content with it.

One problem dealt with, Chang Geng turned to the other. Gu Yun hastily shot back a sultry look.

Chang Geng quietly marked this offense down to be settled at a later date. "So even your glances are rehearsed in advance—as expected of an old hand like you, Zixi."

Batting his lashes, Gu Yun stretched languidly before rising to his feet and sauntering over to Chang Geng. Loosening the fastenings of his fox-fur cloak, he pulled Chang Geng in and wrapped the fur around the both of them. "You could just say you're jealous, Your Majesty," he chuckled softly into Chang Geng's ear. "You're making a face like you've just drunk vinegar."

Gu Yun's heated murmurs sent a tingle shivering down Chang Geng's neck. As expected of a man well-versed in *The Thirty-Six Stratagems*—he had taught Shen Yi merely the bare basics. Gu Yun sniffed at Chang Geng's temples and exclaimed, "So sour—Your Majesty, let's make a deal. Seeing as you just gulped a whole vat of vinegar, won't you let me have a sip of wine?"

Chang Geng laughed in anger. "You're dreaming. You can have a sniff."

Dissatisfied, Gu Yun clicked his tongue. "Last night you let me lick a chopstick's worth—why do I only get a sniff today? It's all Shen Yi's fault; the man's a walking calamity, coming here to make a nuisance of himself on a holiday…"

Chang Geng reached for a chopstick and dipped it in a cup of the warmed wine. "Go ahead, then. Stop haggling."

Gu Yun blinked at him. The two of them regarded each other in silence for a moment, the aroma of wine rising from the chopstick held between them. Just as

Chang Geng thought Gu Yun would behave himself after all, he took the chopstick and sniffed it. Then, cupping Chang Geng's chin, he swiped the residual wine on the chopstick over Chang Geng's lips and, swift as a bolt from the blue, leaned in to lick them clean before tossing the hindersome chopstick aside. The dumbstruck Chang Geng hadn't time to react; he was thoroughly taken advantage of in one wine-scented motion.

Wiping his mouth, Gu Yun drew back with a small smile. "An excellent vintage; I'm drunk."

The new emperor, a victim of this cruel and inventive new form of teasing, sat frozen for a beat. At last he reached the end of his patience. Chasing after Gu Yun, he suddenly felt it was of utmost importance that he *personally* check the progress of General Gu's physical recovery.

Extra:
Qingming After the Rain

CHANG GENG HAD DECLARED to the public that, to avoid any hint of impropriety, he would not under any circumstances set foot in the imperial harem, which would remain under the empress's control. Luckily, Li Feng had never had a large harem, so it was manageable even for a sickly invalid like the empress dowager.

Such a declaration was hardly necessary, as the emperor rarely spent his nights in the palace. As far back as anyone could remember, there had never been an emperor like this one, who clocked in at the palace in the morning only to leave the moment the court assembly drew to a close. At first, some stepped forward to decry such behavior as an affront to established protocol. The emperor's supporters took every last one of them to task—His Majesty had declared from the beginning that he was merely a regent. For all that he was only governing until the crown prince came of age, he was a diligent ruler who never crossed any lines. Why then were there so many bootlickers sowing chaos and urging him to usurp the throne?

Led by Xu Ling, the Imperial Censorate became the emperor's great champion. In the name of setting aside the old and welcoming the new, the department spent its days examining the theoretical basis of the emperor's new policies and preparing supporting arguments for them when debates arose in court.

When court business concluded, the emperor would occasionally make a show of returning to the Prince Yan Estate, which he transformed into a salon of sorts where he privately received members of the imperial court. At the end of the day, however, he went running off to the Marquis Estate, not far away.

That year, the first rains had come unseasonably early. The capital greeted the eve of the Qingming Festival[7] with a steady drizzle.

Gu Yun had yet to lay down his armor for good, but he could finally settle down in the capital long-term. After so many years of feeling like a stranger in his own home, he ordered the overgrown Marquis Estate properly renovated. The Marquis of Anding's estate, which had been on the verge of spawning several terrifying ghost stories, began to look lived-in again at last.

The ongoing renovations to the house and gardens inevitably dug up a number of fascinating old items from years past, and following Captain Huo around and picking through the lot soon became His Majesty's favored after-dinner recreation.

"Did this belong to the eldest princess?" Chang Geng asked, pointing at a square box. Out of respect, he didn't touch it directly.

The old maid who was cleaning the room smiled. "Indeed, she had it specially made for the little marquis." She opened it to show him. To his astonishment, the little box, which looked as if it should have held precious jewels, contained only an old feather duster.

"The little marquis was a terror as a child," the maid said. "He never took a scolding to heart, and if you shut him in his room to reflect on the error of his ways, he'd pick the lock. A slap on the palm or a spanking wouldn't do either—and of

course, the old master had an explosive temper. There eventually came a time when he wanted to discipline the little marquis according to the old family rules, and well, you know what that would entail, Your Majesty. The old marquis was heavy-handed—how could a child endure such a thing? The eldest princess feared what might happen. She recalled that she had once seen a village woman disciplining her son with a broom during a military expedition, and came up with this idea to deal with the little marquis."

Chang Geng gingerly lifted Marshal Gu's feather duster from its residence with both hands. The thin rod that ran through the length of it would break if swung with too much strength, thereby avoiding risk of death to its victim. The fluffy outer layer wasn't made of real pheasant feathers either, but seemed to be a blend of fine bamboo fibers and some sort of bristly fur woven together. To be beaten by something like this…

He had grown up in the Marquis Estate and at times seemed more the residence's master than the master himself. The old maid referred to him as *Your Majesty*, but treated him with no fear or deference. She continued merrily, "Our marquis really was a menace in his youth. He got up to all kinds of trouble; turn your back for an instant and he was liable to climb the walls to tear down the roof, he got so out of hand. The only thing he ever feared was this feather duster. Only mention the word, and he'd immediately behave himself."

Gu Yun always maintained the image of the capable elder with Chang Geng. His childhood years were a complete blank to the young emperor, and he listened with great interest.

"The funniest thing was when the princess tried to beat him. He'd run all over the courtyard, screaming his head off. The way he wailed, you'd think he was actually crying."

"*Actually* crying?" Chang Geng blinked in surprise. "Don't tell me he was pretending."

"Of course he was." The old maid sighed as she walked along. "Short of a real walloping, you'd never catch that little marquis of ours shedding real tears. He'd run around the courtyard bawling like crashes of thunder with no rain. And all the things he'd say, one pitiful line after another, treating his mother to woeful pleas like, 'Mom, don't you love me? Don't you want me anymore? Aren't I your own flesh and blood?' and 'Mom, are you gonna replace me with a more obedient younger brother? I've mended my ways; please don't toss me out. I only have one mom; if even you don't love me anymore, I'll be a feral child, unloved and abandoned to the wilderness'… Just listening made one's heart waver. The princess could never bear to truly lay a hand on him."

Chang Geng was laughing so hard he began to wheeze as he pictured the scene. As expected of a master of military strategy—of course Gu Yun understood the concepts of "the best lies contain a kernel of truth" and "strike first at the heart" even as a child.

The wrinkles fanning from the old maid's eyes creased in a smile. But when she next spoke, the tone of her voice had shifted. "Later on, he went to the border. When he came back, everything had changed."

Chang Geng's smile faded.

The old maid went on, lost in memory. “He used to lock himself in his room every day, wouldn’t respond to anyone, wouldn’t cry. The meals brought to his room would be pushed back out exactly as they arrived. He wouldn’t speak no matter who tried to comfort him and refused to go out. He’d always been like a pesky monkey, but he returned from the border a little ghost, completely transformed. A few months later, when the old marquis finished settling things in the north and returned to the estate… Perhaps it’s not my place to say, but the old marquis was very hard on the boy. I suppose he feared his son would really end up crippled and helpless.”

“What happened?” Chang Geng asked softly.

“The old marquis kicked down his door and dragged him from his room. The boy’s eyes had suffered such a terrible injury; how could it not hurt to be suddenly exposed to sunlight? He stumbled along, weeping the whole way—this time, the tears were real—but he didn’t say a word.” The old maid pointed. “That little pond over there—the old marquis lashed his horsewhip around the boy’s throat, shoved him out over the water so he could see his reflection, and yelled directly into his ears, ‘Look at yourself! Are you a member of the Gu family or not?!’”

Chang Geng followed her pointing finger. The old pond had dried up after years of neglect and only recently been refilled with fresh water. A handful of fish swam in it now, leisurely flipping their fins.

“The little marquis’s throat was caught in the whip, but he still shouted back, ‘I can’t see!’”

Listening to her speak, Chang Geng felt he had been transported back in time to hear those words with his own ears. His hand spasmed around the feather duster.

“The old marquis shoved his son’s head under the water. He said, ‘If you can’t see, then stay down there until you can. Either get on your feet or go find a rafter to hang yourself. The Gu family would rather end its bloodline than keep trash among its ranks.’” Here, the old maid shook her head. “It’s been so many years, but this old woman still remembers every word. He really was far too harsh.”

For a span, neither said a word. Then Chang Geng asked, voice soft, “The old marquis could stand to treat him like that?”

“It’s natural for a parent to feel distress for their child. Aside from hardening his heart to temper his son, what options did he have? There’s something the old marquis once said: that the only way to heal shattered bone is to hammer in iron nails to hold the pieces in place. The more painful the little marquis’s circumstances, the more imperative it was to deny him any crutch—the moment he leaned on one, he’d never stand up again under his own power,” the old maid said. “If the old marquis hadn’t treated his son so harshly, who could have legitimately reassembled the scattered Black Iron Battalion all those years ago?”

Without the Black Iron Battalion, the Far Westerners would likely never have had the opportunity to sail all this way across the sea and make their own attempt at conquest—by the time they came, Great Liang would have long been swallowed up, one bite at a time, by foreign adversaries during the first revolt in the Western Regions. Without an army to defend them, how long would the decrepit aristocrats living in the luxury of the capital have been able to hold onto their noble titles and maintain their lavish lifestyles?

"During the bitter winter months, we servants were forbidden from providing the little marquis warm cotton-padded clothing. The child's hands and feet were nearly blue from cold when he trained, and when he returned to his room, he could barely pick up a bowl. A dozen iron puppets would surround him as he trained all day long while the old marquis watched. We thought that man wouldn't even blink if his son up and died before his eyes… A few years later, the old marquis followed the eldest princess into the next life, and His Majesty the Yuanhe Emperor took the little marquis into the palace." The sound of a bird squawking from around the corner made the old maid pause, and the two of them looked up to see Gu Yun sauntering toward them with a cage in hand. The luckless myna, formerly of the Shen residence, had grown dizzy with the cage's malicious shaking. Speechless with fury, it could only raise its voice and scream bloody murder.

Since being temporarily relieved of his duties and finding himself with free time to deal with this bird, Gu Yun had never once lost the advantage in the human-avian war. Having claimed his victory, he was presently taking the creature on a walk to revel in his triumph. He was brought up short when he saw what Chang Geng was holding, and his eyes narrowed as his expression turned overcast.

Dashing over, Gu Yun grabbed the feather duster. "What nonsense have you dug out of storage? Haven't you anything better to do?"

Even when a chronic illness was deemed cured, there were inevitably lingering symptoms. For instance, Gu Yun would likely never fully recover his sight and hearing. Likewise, although Chang Geng had freed himself from the nightmares that had plagued him most of his life, he was beset by strange dreams when he was particularly exhausted or had too much on his mind.

That night, perhaps because he was still thinking about the feather duster Gu Yun had snatched away, Chang Geng had an odd dream. He dreamed he walked into the Marquis Estate, but it was nothing like the bleak and desolate Marquis Estate he knew. Instead, it was bustling with people and seemed very lively.

Distantly, Chang Geng heard the grind of metal on metal. He followed the sound and soon arrived at a clearing in a rear courtyard, where a group of ferocious-looking iron puppets were attacking a little boy from all sides. The boy's eyes were covered with a strip of black cloth wide enough to obscure half his face as he struggled to dodge the puppets' assault. As Chang Geng watched, one of the puppets behind him lunged forward. The automaton had swapped its sword for an iron rod, which whistled toward the boy in a wide arc. Sensing the malicious wind, the little boy instinctively shifted to evade the strike.

Stop, that won't work!

Chang Geng suddenly remembered the advice he'd been given years ago: *Your mind is agitated, so your footwork is unstable. No matter how powerful the sword technique, if your legs lack stability, then you'll be like a river without a source or a tree without roots—you'll have no foundation on which to build your attack… It's human nature to cower away in fear, but doing so makes it difficult to quickly think up a counterattack. You'll just get flustered and end up getting caught by your enemy instead.*

The moment the boy hesitated and shrank back, the puppet was on top of him. With a loud *crack*, the iron monster's staff struck that slender back, sending

the boy flying as the seams of his outer robe burst open to reveal the protective armor beneath. Chang Geng rushed over, helping the dust-covered boy up from the ground. At the same time, he reached back to draw his own sword, disabling the iron puppets still relentlessly pursuing the child.

Chang Geng tossed his blade aside and reached for the boy's blindfold with shaking hands. Before he could remove it, he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Chang Geng whirled to see a middle-aged man ambling over with his hands clasped behind his back. Dressed in casual robes, he had a handsome face and the elegant demeanor of a scholar. But as his eyes came into view, Chang Geng saw that they were viciously sharp, gleaming with the blades of a thousand-strong army.

Though Chang Geng had never met this man, he recognized him on sight. The adult Gu Yun bore little resemblance to him—their facial features were nothing alike—yet father and son were remarkably similar in bearing, evidence of their shared blood.

The man's steps slowed to a stop as he turned to Chang Geng. "Even if you take him away, you don't have what it takes to raise him. And even if you do manage to raise him, he'll topple before the gentlest of storms…"

Chang Geng carefully held that skinny little boy to his chest. "He can lean on me."

The late Marquis of Anding shook his head. Chang Geng heard the roar of gold tanks from behind him. Lifting the boy, he danced aside as that troop of iron puppets he had disabled reawakened and moved to surround them. The automatons advanced in an orderly fashion, seeming to multiply as they marched until Chang Geng faced an army of iron-wrought heavy armor. The faint sound of a night watchman's clapper echoed in the distance as the battalion of puppets arrayed themselves, turning predatory eyes on Chang Geng as they swarmed forward.

Chang Geng held little Gu Yun and ran until he was gasping for breath. He wanted to shout at that indifferent old man watching from the side—*I saved a nation on the brink of destruction from the late emperor's ineptitude. What makes you think I can't protect Gu Yun?!*

But in the dream his voice stuck in his throat. In his frenzied dash, he missed a step. Heart pounding, he groped out frantically and felt a firm hand grab his own.

His eyes flew open. The gas lamps in the room were already lit, the skies still dark beyond the window. Gu Yun's hand was clasped tightly around his own.

"You didn't wake when I called out to you." Gu Yun felt his forehead. "Are you feeling sick?"

Chang Geng stared at him blankly. "I had a dream," he said at last.

Gu Yun was alarmed.

"It wasn't a nightmare from the wu'ergu." Turning onto his side, Chang Geng clutched Gu Yun's arm to his chest and pressed his forehead against Gu Yun's elbow. "I dreamed I stole you away from the old marquis, and your dad sent a whole battalion of iron puppets to kill me," he confessed quietly.

After a beat of startled silence, Gu Yun burst into peals of carefree laughter. With a light tug, he pulled the emperor, who was trying to have a lie-in, out from beneath the blankets and extricated his arm. “How brave of you, Your Majesty. I’ll have you know the old man has a hundred thousand spectral soldiers at his disposal—but all right, enough of that. It’s time you got up. There’s a grand assembly today… Oh, you know, it’s also the Qingming Festival. Perhaps the old man’s run out of spirit money[8] in the afterlife and came specially to remind us of the occasion?”

Chang Geng watched him dress from where he sat on the bed, savoring every detail. Only when Gu Yun finished smoothing his robes under the glow of the lamps did he reluctantly avert his eyes. “Why would your dad come to me instead of you if he needs money?”

“You’re easier to bully, obviously,” Gu Yun said with a laugh. But after a moment, his smile took on a touch of melancholy. “I don’t owe him a thing. I suppose he’s too embarrassed to come see me.”

That day, Chang Geng cleared half his day’s schedule to accompany Gu Yun as he swept the tombs of his ancestors.

Standing before his family’s ancestral tablets, Gu Yun was like a monk who had taken a vow of silence. He spoke not a word as he went through the motions of burning the paper money. When he had finished, he stepped to the side and stood in cold indifference. His parents lying beneath the Yellow Springs knew what he’d been up to the past few years, so there was no need for him to elaborate. Chang Geng, on the other hand, conscientiously lit some incense and offered a libation of wine. It was difficult to speak with Gu Yun standing right there, so he said quietly in his heart, *I’ll take good care of him, so don’t worry. Please don’t hammer any more iron nails into his body.*

“Let’s go.” Gu Yun was tugging at his arm.

Woken from his thoughts, Chang Geng made to follow him out when Gu Yun turned back toward the eldest princess’s memorial tablet. “Keep an eye on your husband. Unless something urgent comes up, tell him to stay put down there and stop harassing my man.”

At these disgraceful words, Huo Dan, who had escorted them there, nearly fell to his knees and dashed his brains out right there before the old marquis. Gu Yun sniffed huffily, then turned around and pulled Chang Geng away.

His words were unexpectedly effective: after that day, Chang Geng never again dreamed of Old Marquis Gu, nor his army of iron puppets. Still, that wasn’t to say he went quietly. Rather than visit Chang Geng’s dreams, the old marquis visited Gu Yun’s instead… But that, as they say, is a tale for another time.

Extra:
A Father's Earnest Hopes

WITHIN THE PASS lay a flat plain spanning thousands of kilometers. As one traveled inward, past Changping, they would begin to see the banners of the Northern Camp fluttering at the relay stations along the road—this was the vital region surrounding the nation's capital.

A detachment of Black Iron light- and heavy-armor infantrymen was returning from the northern border in triumph, the main army following in their wake. Personally led by the Marquis of Anding, Gu Shen, and consisting of elite soldiers from the three divisions of the Black Iron Battalion, these were the advance troops charged with escorting the spoils of war back to the capital: a large shipment of violet gold, the Wolf King and his sons, the goddess of the eighteen tribes, and other notable prisoners of war.

As the army marched, aside from the solemn rhythm of their footsteps and hoofbeats, not a sound could be heard. The soldiers moved in lockstep, resembling at first glance a legion of iron puppets and not men. When they entered the Northern Camp, the Black Steed riding at the fore lifted his iron visor and raised a hand to bring the march to a stop. The thousands of soldiers behind him immediately obeyed, becoming a sea of absolute stillness. An immense and intimidating pressure seemed to emanate from them, as if their mere presence could topple mountains. The Northern Camp sentry on duty shivered and broke out in gooseflesh.

A member of the commander in chief's personal guard stepped out from the ranks and jogged over to present a Black Iron Tiger Tally to the Northern Camp sentry with both hands. Only then did the sentry realize Marshal Gu had come in person. An explosion seemed to echo through his head as he scrambled off to report to his superiors. Before leaving, however, he courageously snuck a look toward where Marshal Gu sat astride his horse in light-pelt armor.

The man was tall indeed, though not quite the three-headed, six-armed war god of rumors. The sentry's quick glance put him around thirty years of age, with a weather-beaten face and delicate features that seemed to run counter to his reputation as the peerless general who had led a cyclone of black iron to wipe out the Eighteen Northern Tribes.

As if sensing his gaze, Gu Shen turned, his face inscrutable as he met the sentry's eyes. The sentry felt a chill lance through his chest; he scuttled off without a backward glance.

It was said Marshal Gu had been ordained by the heavens to be a vanquisher of armies. As expected, he was no ordinary man.

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The northern barbarians transported to the capital were prisoners of war; nevertheless, His Majesty ordered they be treated with all due respect. The Wolf King's heir and the goddess were sent to the Imperial Court of State Ceremonial's

relay station for government officials, where they were served meals fit for a king. Then there were the grand assemblies and award ceremonies for the three Black Iron divisions. By the time Gu Shen concluded these matters and returned to his estate, it was late in the night.

As he removed his armor, his vicious aura, ferocious enough to frighten off a malevolent ghost, seemed to soften. From the back, he looked no different from any noble official riding in carriages through the capital.

Gu Shen patted the iron puppet standing guard at the front gates as he passed and sighed deeply, exhaustion deepening the lines of his face.

His newly appointed personal guard, Huo Dan, seventeen years old and still practically a child, had been eating sand with him on the northern border throughout the campaign. This was his first time in the capital, and he only wished he had a second pair of eyes as he trailed in the marshal's wake, looking this way and that. The stone spirit screen, the floral latticed windows—even the gas lamps hanging by the gate—everything about the Marquis Estate was novel to this young country bumpkin.

Gu Shen turned to Housekeeper Wang and pointed a finger at Huo Dan. "Find this kid a spare room; don't let him starve."

"Yes, my lord."

"Sir," Huo Dan hurried to ask, "don't you need me to stay with you?"

The servant boys waiting behind Housekeeper Wang snickered as Gu Shen smacked Huo Dan on the back of the head. "I'm going to Her Highness's quarters. What on earth would I need you for?"

There was a princess's tent in the Black Iron Battalion's camp, but she hadn't accompanied Marshal Gu to the northern border this time. Huo Dan knew the eldest princess by reputation only; he had never seen her in person. To him, a princess was hardly different from an unattainable celestial maiden—at the words *Her Highness*, his face flushed as red as a monkey's bottom. By the time he had mastered himself, Gu Shen had already walked away.

Marshal Gu dismissed the servants as he made his way to the rear courtyard. When he reached the door, he tidied his robes, then respectfully said, "Gu Shen begs an audience with Her Highness, the eldest princess."

The old matron standing inside the door beamed. "The marquis is always so polite. Please come in."

At this time in Great Liang, the eldest princess was the precious jewel of the imperial line. No other princess matched her in seniority, and the fact that she was highly capable elevated her status further. She was the last living descendant of the late Emperor Wu and the rightful holder of the Black Iron Tiger Tally—all of this ensured that she was a revered figure within the court, such that even His Majesty the Emperor respectfully called her *Auntie* when he encountered her.

Gu Shen patiently waited for all the meddlesome maidservants to step out before allowing himself to relax. The awe-inspiring severity vanished from his face, displaced by a look of shameless mischief as he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around the eldest princess's waist. "I missed you so much," he murmured. "If only I could kick out all these irrelevant busybodies. Tong-er, come with me to the border next time. It's my turf there—no one will say a word if I want to ride double with you on my horse."

The princess smiled. “The marshal won’t tire till he destroys his last scraps of dignity, I see.”

Gu Shen removed his outer robe and slipped behind the dividing screen to wash. When he stepped back out, still in a state of undress, he reached at once for the princess’s hand, only to be shaken off.

“Stop fooling around,” she said, voice low. “Your son’s here.”

Gu Shen’s smile vanished. Sure enough, when he pulled back the bed curtains, he spied the little dumpling sprawled on his back sound asleep, taking up the entirety of the bed.

“What’s the little brat doing here again?” he said, scowling.

Little Marquis Gu Yun of the Marquis of Anding’s estate had a wet nurse of his own, but the child had a peculiar temperament. He wasn’t at all shy with strangers under ordinary circumstances and didn’t fuss no matter who his caretakers or playmates were. But even at his tender age, the tot had a clear idea of whom he considered his family. He would take milk from his wet nurse, but he refused to acknowledge her as his mother. On one memorable occasion, the child had fled a whole gaggle of servant girls and old maids and slipped into the princess’s room to hide under her bed. Only when the princess returned that evening was he finally dragged out. By then it was so late the princess hadn’t the heart to send him back to his own quarters and had allowed him to stay the night. Since then, it was as if Gu Yun had unlocked a new ability: he began pulling all sorts of cheap tricks to sleep in his mother’s bed.

Absence made the heart grow fonder. But just when his very fond parents were about to get reacquainted, this clueless and unfortunate child had wedged himself between them. Even if he was their own flesh and blood, it was still desperately uncomfortable.

Gu Shen sucked in a breath and reached out to prod at his son’s chubby cheek. After a few pokes, he discovered the boy’s cheeks were wonderfully soft and tender. The feeling was addictive, and he continued prodding until the child flinched away. Little Gu Yun instinctively burrowed back into his blankets, his face wrinkling as he whined.

The eldest princess caught Marquis Gu’s pesky hand. “Are you that bored? Some dad you are. If he wakes up and starts fussing, are you going to coax him back to sleep?”

“He’s *how* old and still needs to be coaxed asleep?” Gu Shen arched a slender brow in displeasure. “Coaxed to sleep—the boy’s too spoiled.”

But even as he said so, he smoothed a palm over Gu Yun’s forehead, covering his eyes lest he be disturbed by the faint glow of the gas lamps. The Marquis of Anding’s hand was broad and steady, his palm a warm and stabilizing presence. Little Gu Yun quickly settled down, slipping back into a deep slumber beneath its comforting weight.

The princess chuckled. “And what exactly do you call this?”

Gu Shen coughed awkwardly as he searched for an excuse. “I’ve no patience for the little brat’s wailing, that’s all.”

Patting her son gently over the blankets, the princess asked, “How are things on the northern border?”

“With me and the Black Iron Battalion there, what could go wrong? There’s nothing to worry about.” Gu Shen’s smile was touched with arrogance as he lay down on the bed with his legs outstretched. Curled up under the blankets, Gu Yun barely measured the length of his calf.

This little brat. After all this time, he’s still so tiny, Gu Shen thought idly.

The little boy was the spitting image of the eldest princess. Gu Shen gazed down at his sleeping face, his eyes gentling. “If you find life in the capital too trying, leave with me after the turn of the year. The northern border is a place His Majesty can’t touch. Even if life is harsh, we’ll be free.”

“What about Xiao-Shiliu?” the princess asked.

“We’ll bring him with us. It’ll save everyone a load of trouble, seeing as no one in the estate dares to discipline him.” Gu Shen stroked his son’s hair and sighed. “The little brat has all the luck. He looks so much like you. I haven’t the heart to be ruthless with him even when I ought to be.”

The princess had no idea what to say. Even she didn’t care to know what Marshal Gu considered *ruthless*.

After a moment of thought, Gu Shen stretched, then sat up to lean back against the side of the bed. “The sixteen nations of the Western Regions have come to the imperial court to pay their respects, and the wokou pirates in the East Sea have yet to develop into an enemy worth fearing. Now the barbarians beyond our northern border have surrendered. If nothing changes, we can expect at least a decade of peace. I plan to use it to recuperate, train our troops, and expand the Black Iron Battalion. After ten years, there won’t be a nation in the world that will dare incur the wrath of our armored cavalry—Tong-er, when the time comes, let’s return the Black Iron Tiger Tally to His Majesty, okay?”

The princess smiled sweetly at him. “Does the marshal intend to lay down his armor and retire to the countryside? I’m afraid I don’t know how to weave cloth, so you’ll have to marry a concubine who does.”

Gu Shen tapped her lightly on the forehead. His gentle smile faded slightly. “Those in high positions must avoid holding too much power. In the event that we really do master all our foreign enemies, holding the Black Iron Tiger Tally will only lead His Majesty to find fault with me. Xiao-Shiliu doesn’t have what it takes to become a pillar of this nation. If we both take a step back, he’ll have a wider path to walk in the future… What are you looking at?”

“I’m looking at the famously hard-hearted marshal’s earnest hopes for his son.”

Gu Shen coughed in embarrassment, then reached up to turn down the gas lamp. “It’s late. Hurry up and get some rest—scoot this little meatball over a bit.”

“Wait, don’t squish him.”

“Forget it, I’ll just toss the little bastard out the window!”

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Gu Yun startled awake with a sharp shiver. He lifted a hand to his eyes, blocking the thin bar of lamplight. For a moment, he felt lost, unsure where or when

he was.

"You're finally awake," said a voice beside him, low and impatient. "You slept so long you missed lunch. Come, get up. You can have some hot soup to tide you over for now. What do you want to eat?"

Finally Gu Yun came fully awake. Letting his eyelids drop again, he drawled, "Anything is fine."

It was the third year of Taishi. Gu Yun had been touring the south and visiting the garrisons. To make it back to the capital in time for New Year's Day, he'd traveled by kite overnight without stopping to rest. Upon getting home, he had passed out the instant his head hit his pillow.

It was already nearly dusk. For some reason, he'd dreamed the old marquis had been blocking the light for him so he could sleep.

What a strange dream. The only person he knew who would be so thoughtful was his dear emperor.

Gu Yun grabbed Chang Geng's hand and examined it playfully. Gu Yun had held the Black Iron Tiger Tally for years. His hands had long become callused and scarred, and he was no more the boy who had come up with all sorts of excuses to sneak into his mother's bed.

His Majesty's hands showed traces of his martial arts training, and his fingers were lightly callused from drawing his bow. Even so, he spent most of his time holding a brush. His fingers were slender and well-formed, his palms slightly cool —not at all like those of the man in Gu Yun's dream. Why had his brain concocted such an outlandish scene?

Still holding a memorial, Chang Geng turned to rest his chin on the top of Gu Yun's head. "What's wrong?" he murmured.

"Nothing," Gu Yun said easily. "Only that it's been ages since I last touched Your Majesty's dragon claws. I've missed them."

The old marquis using his hand to block the light?

He really must have been dreaming.

But the scene continued to gnaw at his mind. Perhaps because he had slept too long during the day, Gu Yun couldn't find sleep that night no matter how he tried. With one arm wrapped around Chang Geng and the other pillowed beneath his own head, he allowed his mind to drift in the soft darkness.

Both his parents had died young. Gu Yun found himself struggling to remember what the eldest princess looked like. By comparison, his impression of the old marquis was much sharper—perhaps a consequence of all the time he'd spent glaring furiously at his father's face.

He and his father had been like a pair of old nemeses. The marquis was ruthless in his treatment of Gu Yun, and Gu Yun responded by doggedly refusing to beg for mercy, as if to do so would be to concede defeat.

"What are you thinking about?" Chang Geng whispered, slightly nasal, as he shifted within the loop of Gu Yun's arm.

"Did I wake you?" Gu Yun stroked his hand up the side of Chang Geng's face, pressing light fingers to his temple.

There was no way Marshal Gu, Master of Romance, would say something so absurd as *I'm thinking about my dad* while lying in bed with his lover. After a beat, he whispered back, "I was thinking…that Your Majesty must be tired from working so hard lately. You're awfully well-behaved tonight."

When all was said and done, Gu Yun was still something of an elder to Chang Geng. Even if the nature of their relationship had changed, his instinct was to treasure and indulge Chang Geng more than anything else. Regardless of how shamelessly he behaved, when it came to matters of the bedroom, as Chang Geng's godfather, he felt self-conscious taking the initiative. Although he occasionally spoke like a rank scoundrel, he mostly yielded to Chang Geng in whatever he wanted.

Picking up the note of suggestion in Gu Yun's words, Chang Geng jolted awake at once. He stared at Gu Yun, his gaze turning heated. But a thought seemed to occur to him, and he paused. With steely focus and held breath, he pressed his fingers to Gu Yun's wrist for several long seconds, checking his pulse. Finally, he tamped firmly down on his desires and said tightly, "You've had such a long and tiring journey, yet the first thing you do is to provoke me. Are you *trying* to make yourself ill?"

"I've missed you."

Scalp prickling, Chang Geng mustered all his restraint to squeeze out, "I'm not in the mood."

"Oh." A pause. "In that case, what's that rubbing against me?" Gu Yun asked innocently.

"…Shut up and sleep!"

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"Shut up and sleep!" A pair of veins popped into existence on Gu Shen's forehead. He was sorely tempted to toss the little meatball lying on his bed out the door.

The eldest princess had been in poor health since giving birth to Gu Yun, and fell ill whenever the seasons began to turn. It was never serious, but she was always worried about getting Gu Yun sick and refused to let him stay in her room. In the interest of providing their child with a good example of fairness and equality, she rejected Marshal Gu's hopeful advances and kicked him out as well.

Barred from entering, the little boy stood on tiptoe and clung to the windowsill, his eyes huge as he stared forlornly into the princess's room. Gu Shen's heart had softened at the sight. In a moment of weakness, he brought the kid to his own quarters…only to regret the impulse almost immediately.

"Are you going to sleep or not?"

Gu Yun burrowed beneath the blankets before poking his head out to bare his pearly milk teeth in a smile, entirely unafraid of the ferocious Marshal Gu.

"Fine." Gu Shen pinned the brat down with a broad hand before patting him awkwardly on the back. "How does your mom get you to fall asleep?"

"She sings me a song!" Gu Yun chirped brightly.

"Nonsense, your mom doesn't even know how to sing."

Unabashed at having been so quickly exposed, the child continued his cheerful attempts to squirm free from beneath Marshal Gu's iron palm.

Gu Shen regarded the tot in amazement—the little bastard's teeth had barely grown in, and he already had the gall to try to get one over on his old man. He didn't even blush as he lied, nor did he seem to fear Gu Shen. The audacity of this child.

"I'll tell you a story if you behave," Gu Shen said.

At this, Gu Yun at last lay his head down on the pillow, accepting his father's offer.

Gu Shen hesitated, his face unreadable. He stiffly opened his mouth. "Once upon a time, there was a little…a little dog…"

How could Marshal Gu possibly know how to tell a proper bedtime story? He racked his brain, making things up on the fly and sounding like he'd rather be dead than telling nursery tales. Droning on like an old monk reading scripture, he nearly put himself to sleep instead of the child. Gu Yun soon grew bored and began to wriggle again, whining all the while. Gu Shen spanked his little bottom. "Behave!"

Furious, Gu Yun flipped over and sat up, working up to a torrent of tears. Gu Shen regarded him stonily, and was shocked to discover the little brat already knew how to read people's body language. Upon realizing the tried and true tactics he employed against his mother were ineffective, the boy swallowed his tears back down without even trying to maintain the act.

"I'll tell my mom on you!" Gu Yun declared.

Gu Shen arched a brow. "Go right ahead. Your mom is my wife. See how far that gets you."

The boy didn't quite know what a *wife* was, but he had a vague feeling Gu Shen had a point. He lapsed into a sullen silence.

Gu Shen watched him warily. Something told him this brat wasn't going to take it lying down… Perhaps this was evidence of the intuitive bond between father and son. He was suddenly curious to see what this child would try next. Without further ado, he rolled Gu Yun up in a blanket, stuffed him under his arm, and closed his eyes in feigned sleep.

The child behaved himself for a while—he had much more patience than Gu Shen expected—but eventually, he began to test his bonds with small wriggles. When no response came from his father, he inched closer to check whether his captor had fallen asleep. The child's soft breaths tickled Gu Shen's face and made his lips twitch with an urge to smile. *So sneaky. Is he going to scribble on my face?* Gu Shen wondered.

After watching his father for a span, Gu Yun called out, soft as a kitten's mew, "Are you asleep?"

Gu Shen kept his eyes firmly closed.

Gu Yun grinned mischievously and squirmed free of his blanket. Scooting to the foot of the bed, he reached out a paw and scratched hard at the sole of Marshal Gu's foot. The instant his father bolted upright, the brat rolled off the bed and slipped smoothly beneath it.

Marshal Gu was stunned beyond words. He realized he had underestimated this chubby dumpling. The little bastard hadn't settled for something so childish as drawing on his father's face. He had recognized at once that what Gu Shen most wanted was to sleep, so he directed all his efforts toward refusing to let him. He'd waited till his father had supposedly drifted off before striking a fatal blow, and even prepared an escape route in advance!

Rolling up his sleeves, Gu Shen jumped down from the bed and crouched on the ground. "Get out here!"

Gu Yun shuffled further under the bed and gleefully pulled a face at him.

Clad only in his inner garments, the commander in chief of the Black Iron Battalion squatted down in the middle of the night and faced off against a child across the barrier of a bed board. "Are you coming out or not?"

Gu Yun merrily shook his head.

Laughing in anger, Gu Shen beckoned to Gu Yun. Softening his voice, he coaxed, "Come out now. Dad will tell you a story."

Intrigued, Gu Yun leaned forward to crawl out. But at the last moment, he thought better of it. Staring suspiciously at Gu Shen, he cried, "You spanked me!"

The kid even knew how to negotiate terms of surrender—Gu Shen smiled. "I won't spank you anymore. Now, hurry up and come out."

Gu Yun, apparently appeased, began crawling out. Yet halfway through, he paused again, as if he'd suddenly recalled something. "I don't believe you!"

He was surprisingly difficult to fool, too.

Gu Shen tucked his itching hand behind his back and lied like a wolf in sheep's clothing. "I promise I won't strike you. If I strike you, then I'm…I'm that little dog."

After turning this over in his childish brain, Gu Yun deemed the terms acceptable and was finally tricked into coming out. Gu Shen was on him at once, snatching him up like an eagle seizing a chick. "Filthy little monkey, Dad's not spanking you, just dusting you off," Gu Shen said with a menacing smile.

A quarter of an hour later saw Gu Yun howling with tears, having been thoroughly dusted with his father's iron palm.

Satisfied, Gu Shen wrapped the tyke back in his blanket roll and set him down. Thinking back over the battle of wits that had just transpired, he realized the little brat had potential. He patted the sobbing dumpling on the head. "I'll tell you a story. Are you listening?"

Gu Yun poked his tear-dampened face out and glared at his father with mistrust.

It was a moment before Gu Shen continued. "I'm going to tell you the story of Great Liang's military expedition on the northern border."

"What's a Great Liang?" Gu Yun asked in a watery voice.

"Our nation of Great Liang extends from the great pass in the north to the offshore islands in the south, the vast mountains in the west, and the boundless sea in the east. A journey from the east to the west by horse takes months, and the sights along the way are each more wondrous than the next. The common folk make their

homes all across our lands, ranging from the north to the south and living in harmony…"

His voice was no longer dull and flat. Although Gu Yun didn't quite understand everything, he listened with rapt interest, finally soothed to stillness.

"Do you know what *common folk* means?" Gu Shen asked.

Gu Yun hesitated, then shook his head.

"It refers to millions of people—men like your dad, women like your mom, kids like you, and old folks like Uncle Wang," Gu Shen said. "And the place where we live is called Great Liang. We have many good things here: we wear silk and woven cloth, ride steam-powered carriages, and eat… What do you like to eat?"

"Meat," Gu Yun answered.

Gu Shen eyed him before continuing. This child was far too easily satisfied. "But there's another place with a group of people who look different from us and are poorer than us. They have meat, but it's not enough to fill their bellies, and most of it is tough and dry." Gu Shen pried open Gu Yun's mouth and looked at his delicate milk teeth, then shook his head scornfully. "You definitely wouldn't be able to chew through it. And anyway, there's never enough. They don't grow grain, so the pastries and sweets you eat everyday… They don't have any of that. Every day, they starve—do you know what *starve* means?"

The little boy stared at him vacantly, clearly ignorant of the term.

"They often traded with us for food," Gu Shen said. "But over time, they grew dissatisfied. They thought what we gave was too little. So they sent their people here to take what they wanted by force."

Gu Yun's eyes were round. He curled up and clung to the edges of his blankets, as if terrified someone might come take away his own meat and sweets.

"This is why Great Liang must have iron armor and people like your dad," Gu Shen continued. "To ensure the peace of our nation."

The child blinked. "…Peace?"

Gu Shen scooped him up and settled him against his broad and sturdy chest, his heart beating a slow and steady rhythm. He patted Gu Yun on the back and told him about peace and the Black Iron Battalion. He described the heavy armor that roared like beasts, the armored eagles that sliced through the sky, and the light pelts that could travel a thousand kilometers in a single day. He recounted how the Black Iron Battalion had swept across the northern border and forced the wolves' surrender… At some point, Gu Yun fell asleep. Gu Shen glanced down and saw that the rims of the little brat's eyes were slightly red. He had one of his claws fisted in his father's robes, as if about to stuff the cloth straight into his mouth.

Gu Shen thought then: *Little brat, if you work hard and make something of yourself, our nation might yet remain in good order for another generation.*

The instant the notion occurred to him, he felt it was too fanciful to place such a heavy burden on the shoulders of this plump little dumpling. Scoffing at himself, he reached up to turn down the gas lamp. *Ay, I'll simply let nature take its course*.

On this night, the iron-blooded Gu Shen's heart still harbored an indulgent wish for his only son—that he might grow up free and unfettered.

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That day, when court had adjourned, Gu Yun went neither to the Northern Camp nor to the Lingshu Institute. Instead, he returned home to the Marquis Estate and headed to the training grounds, where the armory was located.

Uncle Wang trailed behind him. “My lord, what are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for a windsla… Well, technically it’s a stick.” Gu Yun allowed the iron puppet creaking around the courtyard to pass before walking in. The Gu bloodline had produced a military leader in every generation as far back as they could remember. Their influence had peaked during Gu Shen’s time, when the Marquis of Order had held the Black Iron Tiger Tally and rivaled the emperor himself in power.

The Marquis Estate’s armory contained all the family heirlooms and famous weapons Gu Yun’s ancestors had collected over the years. The moment he stepped into the place, he was assailed by its chilling aura. The inner chamber was populated mostly with ancient swords, while the outer held weapons that incorporated the newer engine technology. Its denizens included veterans of the battlefield that had soaked in the blood of thousands as well as virgin blades that had never touched a whetstone. All were neatly displayed in solemn—or malevolent—silence.

Uncle Wang called over a handful of servants, carrying a large chest for Gu Yun’s inspection. “This is everything our family has in storage. What kind of windslasher is the marquis looking for?”

“About thirty centimeters long.” Gu Yun considered that, since Uncle Wang had watched him grow up, there was no shame in telling him. “Actually, it’s not a real windslasher,” Gu Yun said with a laugh. “It’s a hollow replica that was used as a toy…” He coughed awkwardly. “Honestly, I just thought about it for the first time in years myself; don’t worry if you can’t find it. I suppose it’s long gone.”

“Oh.” Uncle Wang’s mind worked. “That thing—it’s still here. Give me a moment, I’ll find it for you.”

He sent one of the servants to fetch a ladder, which he set beside a wooden cabinet containing a number of bows. The doddering old man was about to clamber up himself when Gu Yun stopped him. “Allow me.”

“There’s a little box at the top,” explained Uncle Wang. “Everything left from the marquis’s childhood should be in there.”

Gu Yun dutifully climbed the ladder. Sure enough, an iron box squatted atop the cabinet. He brushed away a thick layer of dust and opened it, revealing a suit of tiny, toy-like armor with a helmet and vambraces stored inside. The armor wasn’t truly wrought from black iron, but was very light and finely made. Gu Yun had no idea he’d had these sorts of toys as a child. He stood for a moment in stunned silence, sifting through his memories, but couldn’t recall a time when he had played with these things.

Aside from these, the pile of children’s toys in the box contained a slingshot, a tiny steam-powered carriage, and the very windslasher he sought, roughly thirty centimeters long.

Gu Yun carefully lifted out the hollow windslasher. It was tiny in his hands—slim enough that he could easily hold it between two fingers—and weighed hardly anything at all. He wiped away dust to reveal the characters *Gu Yun* etched in stark relief at its base, followed by another line of text that said *Xiao-Shiliu*… The writing was not his own elegant script. The characters here were deeply carved, absent any extraneous flourish to the point that they seemed almost brutal.

Each and every soldier of the Black Iron Battalion had their names engraved onto their windslashers. Gu Yun had thought that, despite being the commander in chief, he was the only one who'd never performed this rite—but, to his growing surprise, his name had been carved here all this time.

He was completely gobsmacked. Here was genuine evidence that proved his vague and fragmented memories were based in truth. Looking down at the little thing, a scene floated to the surface of his mind…

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Little Gu Yun stood on tiptoe, clinging to his father's arm. His father was strong; even with one arm occupied supporting his son, the other didn't so much as shake as it finished etching the characters for *Gu Yun*. When he was done, he showed the child his handiwork. "Now that your name's been carved on it, it's yours."

The little boy couldn't yet read, but he nevertheless carefully inspected the inscription and traced the characters with an earnest little finger. "*Xiao—Shi—liu*… huh?"

Wasn't there a character missing?

Gu Shen burst into laughter. "It says 'Gu Yun.' Son, how do you expect to step onto the battlefield with a windslasher labeled 'Xiao-Shiliu'? Are you trying to make your enemies laugh until they croak?"

Gu Yun couldn't see what was so funny, but after thinking it over, he said magnanimously, "Gu Yun is fine, I guess. But I want to add Xiao-Shiliu at the bottom."

That day, Marshal Gu's guffaws could be heard a courtyard away.

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"The old marquis had it specially commissioned from the Lingshu Institute back in the day," Uncle Wang said, squinting at the hollowed-out iron rod in Gu Yun's hands. "It doesn't have the inner workings, but the outer shell is a scaled-down version of a real windslasher."

Gu Yun ran his fingers carefully over the old toy and said nothing.

His impression of his father had always been that he was cold and unyielding. The swords he shoved into Gu Yun's hands in his childhood years had all been whetted with real blood. Likewise, the iron puppets that were his sparring partners were genuinely capable of shattering his bones, or even killing him.

“The cruelty of the world drove him to do what he did. The old marquis had few good choices. Please don’t blame him,” Uncle Wang said quietly.

Had he spoken these words to Gu Yun twenty years ago, even if he had broken them down and explained his reasoning, bit by bit, Gu Yun would never have listened or understood. But now he was the same age his father had been back then. He could extrapolate a whole sequence of events, with all of its causes and effects, from Uncle Wang’s single vague sigh.

Gu Shen had wanted to retire after pacifying the nation. But the Yuanhe Emperor, mesmerized by the barbarian consort’s beauty, suspected his motives as the bearer of the Black Iron Tiger Tally. Any emotion, deeply felt, could spur action—ferocious beasts might fall to their knees in sorrow, vicious fiends bend to smell the flowers in joy; the fearless might advance bravely, and the cowardly resort to frenzied extremes.

The Yuanhe Emperor was deeply suspicious—and what was more, he was impatient, unwilling to wait for Gu Shen to realize his long-held dream of a peaceful and orderly nation. Once he took matters into his own hands and promoted the barbarian goddess to the rank of noble consort, the fragile balance between sovereign and subject began to deteriorate. The emperor repeatedly moved to curtail the power of military leaders, while despicable individuals in the imperial court took their cue from his example and made their own plans, culminating in the brazen attack on the Black Iron Battalion.

Gu Shen was left with no choice but to harden his heart against his cosseted son. Perhaps he had foreseen the chaos that awaited them in the future, or perhaps he merely saw his own fate too clearly—he had wished to cut a path to freedom for Gu Yun, for the Black Iron Battalion, for the Gu family, and for the vast territories of Great Liang.

Had it been Gu Yun in the old marquis’s place… Gu Yun shook his head. He couldn’t guess whether he would be so ruthless. As he carefully replaced the windslasher inside the box, he remembered an idle conversation he’d had with Chang Geng.

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“Me? I was never afraid of my dad as a kid. If anything, I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to beat him.” Gu Yun furrowed his brow in confusion. “Huge’er was a tiny woman; even if her methods were cruel, you dwarfed her by the time you were twelve or thirteen. Why did you fear her so?”

Chang Geng considered this for a moment. “I suppose you and I are quite different this way.”

“That’s right; you were a moody child with a gentle disposition.” A thought occurred to Gu Yun. “Were you ever afraid of me?”

“What?” Chang Geng started in surprise. Then he burst into laughter. “Why on earth would I be afraid of you?”

He left unsaid: *I was way too busy thinking of ways to take care of you.*

“Compared to Huge’er, I was a much sterner parent, wasn’t I?” asked Gu Yun, displeased. “Are you trying to tell me that, in your eyes, this marshal inspires

less terror than a pint-sized barbarian girl?"

Chang Geng smiled. "Even if you were some all-powerful deity winging through the sky, you wouldn't hurt a hair on my head. How could I be afraid of you? No child will fear someone who loves them."

No child will fear someone who loves them…

Gu Yun's heart stuttered in his chest as he remembered Chang Geng's words.

He had always presumed he never feared his father simply due to his innate nature—he had always been the type to rise to the occasion and become stronger in the face of overwhelming adversity. Yet it turned out that, buried deep in his faintest memories, there had always been this little hollowed-out windslasher, protecting him with its indomitable spirit.

"Tsk." Gu Yun hopped down from the ladder, feeling glum. "I understand. I'll personally burn some money for the old man during the Qingming Festival this year."

Extra:
The World of Mortals

AFTER A DIFFICULT year, the four borders of Great Liang were finally stabilized. The emperor, with Gu Yun's explicit approval, commenced a round of military reform. It was around this time that Shen Yi finally mustered up the courage to present his letter of resignation to His Majesty. After listening to his reasons, Chang Geng set the memorial aside and instructed Shen Yi to go home and think things over.

General Shen's memorial was filled with fanciful excuses. In reality, the reason for his resignation was obvious: he wanted to go home and get married. Given the complicated nature of his intended's family situation, he had guessed she was unlikely to involve herself with an official of the imperial court. Thus, Shen Yi had elected to relinquish his post, find steady work in some civilian industry, and, with whatever monies his family would provide, marry into his bride's family instead of the other way around.

Back at home, Chang Geng asked, "Zixi, do you think Old Master Shen knows about this?"

"Hard to say," Gu Yun said. "But anyway, it's not like his dad can control him either."

Shen Jiping seemed like a gentle and eloquent person, a soft man who could be easily pushed around. But any examination of his actions would quickly spoil this notion: every decision he made was shockingly controversial. Despite spending half his life defying social norms, the vast majority were still under the misconception that he was a dependable man. He was the perfect embodiment of the expression "one can't judge a book by its cover."

Throughout the years, his aspirations had grown stranger and stranger—saddled with a son like this, it was small wonder Old Master Shen had thrown up his hands and turned to immortal cultivation.

Gu Yun sighed. "Forget it. I'll go talk to Shen Jiping in a few days."

Chang Geng's face clouded over. *He wants to talk to him again?!*

One could only imagine what ancient memories these two idiots would drag up once they started talking. When that rabble of military ruffians gathered around one big table to eat and drink… Chang Geng knew Gu Yun only pretended to behave in his presence, but he had *some* faith the man wouldn't completely let loose and indulge in food and wine behind his back. Still, he would undoubtedly end up staying out all night at the Northern Camp instead of coming home, which Chang Geng found deeply irritating.

Thus, with Gu Yun none the wiser, Chang Geng promptly penned a letter to Chen Qingxu laying out the situation. He wrote with utmost earnestness: *We write to you out of both public and private concern. Our nation lies in ruins waiting to be revitalized. We require all the manpower we can muster. It would be a great pity for a trusted official like General Shen to step down from his post at this juncture…*

Of course, Shen Yi had never brought up the matter of his resignation with Chen Qingxu herself, and had been acting entirely on his own initiative.

Upon receiving the emperor's letter, Chen Qingxu said not a word to anyone but returned to her home in Shanxi the very same day. Once she had sorted the whole thing out with her family with maximum efficiency, she flew back on one of the great condors that was still conducting test runs between the northwest and the capital. When she at last tracked down Shen Yi, she said bluntly, "I'm the head of the Chen family. Why didn't you come to me about your concerns over my family?"

Shen Yi had no good answer.

When Gu Yun heard what had happened, he laughed for a good six months. Half a year later, military commanders throughout the nation sent letters congratulating General Shen on finally finding a prominent family into which he could marry himself, and requesting that the Marquis of Anding represent all who couldn't attend the merry occasion by arranging a series of grand pranks for the newlyweds on their wedding night.[9]

Gu Yun, that gleeful sower of discord, gladly agreed. He began his preparations days in advance, thinking up a dozen new ways to torture Shen Yi while helping the Shen household prepare for the impending nuptials.

Shen Yi had spent half his life battling wits with this Gu bastard and had reached the point where he could spot a rotten idea brewing solely from the slant of his marshal's evil smile. In the interest of self-preservation, he gathered reinforcements in advance, requesting a private audience with His Majesty the Emperor.

"Your Majesty," Shen Yi said, entirely businesslike, "while I was organizing my personal effects the other day, I recalled that Marshal Gu once entrusted four letters to me when we were fighting on the Jiangnan front lines. Among them, two were personal letters addressed to Your Majesty. I sent one of them to you back then, but there's another that remains in my care. I've no idea of its contents. Would Your Majesty like to have it?"

Chang Geng guessed instantly what had happened—Gu Yun must have prepared a whole stack of dispatches to reassure everyone should anything go awry during the battle. The unsent missive very likely contained Gu Yun's final farewell. He hesitated only briefly. "In that case, we'll thank you for the trouble, General Shen."

"It's no trouble at all." Shen Yi rubbed his hands together and continued, "Your Majesty, this subject has one other favor he would ask of you…"

Containing Gu Yun was a simple matter now that Shen Yi had finally grasped the proper method. All Chang Geng had to do was tell Gu Yun, "It hasn't been easy for Miss Chen these years. She just wants to get married properly."

Gu Yun banished the task entrusted to him by his army brothers to the back of his mind without a moment's hesitation. Not only did he behave himself, he even loosened his own purse strings and commissioned a special batch of fireworks through the Lingshu Institute's civilian-facing enterprise. When the auspicious evening arrived, the sky over the Shen Estate in the capital and the Northern Camp in the outskirts erupted in a dazzling display of fireworks that lit the entire city.

But even without anyone making trouble on purpose, Shen Yi was a lightweight. After touring the hall and toasting the guests at each table, he was dead drunk. Holding a pair of cups and slurring his speech, he made his way over to Gu Yun. He had a belly full of words, but all he managed was a belch. He suddenly realized they were in full view of a crowd. He had meant to say many things, yet all were difficult to voice; for a moment, he merely stood and stared at Gu Yun in a tipsy daze.

Gu Yun sighed. “Jiping-xiong, your eloquence, as always, is unmatched.”

He relieved Shen Yi of the cups, clinked them together, and downed both in rapid succession on Shen Yi’s behalf.

Ever since he had begun helping Shen Yi prepare for the wedding, Gu Yun had been feeling inexplicably happy. It was different from the sudden momentous joy of being named Zhuangyuan in the imperial examinations or emerging victorious from a fierce battle. There was no particular thing he could point to as the reason for his happiness; it was merely that everything he saw was pleasing to the eye, a source of unalloyed delight.

Shen Yi threw an arm around his friend’s shoulders and hugged him fiercely. He looked like he might cry, then managed to twist his expression into an ugly smile, as if he had no idea how to express himself.

“Are you happy now?” Gu Yun asked softly.

Shen Yi didn’t know what to say, so he nodded his head furiously. The first time he’d followed this man into battle, he could never have imagined a day would come when they would stand together at his wedding.

“Live a good life,” Gu Yun said, “and try not to talk your wife’s ear off.”

Torn between laughter and tears, Shen Yi pounded his fist twice against Gu Yun’s back.

“All right, stop wiping your snot on my robes. You mustn’t keep your bride waiting,” Gu Yun said with a light shove. “I’ll keep them out, so go on.”

Shen Yi took two steps away before sending a glance behind him. Sure enough, with Gu Yun standing there like a spear thrust in the ground, no one dared come up and pester him. He felt a ripple of melancholy then—over the course of his military career, Gu Yun had guarded the gates of their nation, various cities, and even the imperial palace. Now, this absurdly overqualified man was standing guard over the gates of his nuptial chamber…and, what was more, he looked delighted at the honor.

Shen Yi’s eyes stung; remorse welled up in his heart. He hurried back in a flurry of steps and came clean: “Zixi, that sealed letter you wrote in Jiangnan—I gave it to His Majesty. You…uh…anyway, I’m off.”

Gu Yun was speechless. Despite bullying Shen Yi since they were kids, he had gone out of his way to treat the man well on his wedding day only to suffer such a dramatic betrayal—what was this but karmic retribution?

As the lively wedding drew to a close, Gu Yun braced himself to return to the Marquis Estate. His Majesty’s attendance at the wedding was a sign of great favor, but staying too long would make things awkward for everyone. Chang Geng had left after bestowing a gift upon the couple and sipping a single cup of wine. By the time Gu Yun arrived home, he had long been waiting in their room with the lamps

lit.

Gu Yun had spent the journey home concocting a rotten idea. He called for a servant to bring him a pot of wine and splashed the contents on his lapels and sleeves so he smelled like a walking distillery. Only then did he dismiss his servants and stumble his way through the door. Chang Geng was bent over some papers, reading by lamplight. Startled by the sudden gust of wind and stench of alcohol, he looked up with a slight frown in time to see Gu Yun trip over the threshold and tumble into the room. Shoving aside his reading, he dashed over to catch him, shivering at the touch of his frozen hands.

The marquis was an energetic person, but no matter how hot the weather, his hands and feet were always ice-cold. The medicine he'd taken for decades had harmed his body, but he never uttered a word of complaint, and so Chang Geng didn't dare express his concern either. He simply watched over him with utmost care. On the other hand, Gu Yun had gradually let go of his habit of wearing only thin, unlined robes in the middle of winter. It was through these sorts of small compromises that the two gradually reached a tacit understanding of one another.

Chang Geng tried to take hold of Gu Yun's hands, but Gu Yun refused to cooperate, acting the part of a lolling drunkard with remarkable skill and leaving His Majesty completely helpless to stop him.

"Zixi! Heavens… How much did you drink? Did you lift all your prohibitions today?"

Gu Yun groaned softly as he slumped heavily against Chang Geng and groped at his waist. Seizing Chang Geng's moment of distraction as he dealt with Gu Yun's wandering hands, Gu Yun pushed him back against the writing desk and cast a surreptitious glance over Chang Geng's shoulder. Scanning the contents of the desk, he spotted that letter he had completely forgotten about—it was still sealed!

Cheering at his stroke of luck, Gu Yun doubled down on his performance. He tripped on purpose and overturned the writing desk, sending brushes and paper scattering across the ground and nearly knocking Chang Geng off his feet in the process.

Struggling to hold Gu Yun upright, Chang Geng dragged the unruly man onto the bed, sweating from the exertion.

But this drunk refused to behave himself and lie down. "Beautiful…don't go," he murmured, clinging to Chang Geng.

A vein throbbing at his temples, Chang Geng demanded, "Who are you calling out to?"

"Chang Geng, my darling," Gu Yun said, hoarse and slightly slurred. Chang Geng's scalp prickled at the sound. Gu Yun spread his arms wide. "Come and… mm…spend the night with your yifu."

Chang Geng was a naturally tidy person, and very much wanted to turn back and sort out the mess around the table. But with Gu Yun tempting him like this, he couldn't bear to do it. After a lengthy battle between his desire for cleanliness and his desire for Gu Yun, His Majesty surrendered to the force of the latter. He climbed onto the bed, snuffed the gas lamp, and yanked the bed curtains shut.

The next day, when Chang Geng returned to his senses and bent to tidy the scattered papers, he discovered the letter, which he hadn't made his mind up about opening, was missing from the miscellany around his desk. Only then did he realize a certain someone had taken advantage of his lust-addled mind.

Gu Yun's ability to act dumb and evade questions was second to none. His mouth was more tightly sealed than a Black Carapace's gold tank, and he refused point-blank to admit to the existence of any such letter. Shen Yi, the only other person who knew of the missive, had a guilty conscience; he refused to appear as a witness and spent several days playing dead.

Despite pursuing the matter for over half a year, Chang Geng never did learn the whereabouts or contents of the letter. Over time, he gradually stopped brooding about it.

In hindsight, it was his initial hesitation to open the envelope that had provided Gu Yun his window of opportunity. Perhaps it was simply ordained by the heavens that he and that unsent letter were never to cross paths. Besides, with the author of the letter still alive and well enough to scheme against him, what need was there for him to read such heartbreaking words?

Chang Geng decided it was fine to believe Gu Yun's nonsense just this once —as far as he was concerned, the letter had never existed.

Extra:
Peace and Prosperity

WHETHER THE CROWN PRINCE Li Zheng was a fortunate or unfortunate person was difficult to say.

He was the child of the late Longan Emperor and his empress, the legitimate heir but not the eldest son. He was preceded by an ambitious elder brother, and history indicated that, upon reaching adulthood, he was bound to embark on a life-or-death struggle for the throne with his brother, pulling their mothers into a fight for the emperor's favor.

The crown prince was gentle and quiet by nature—the gentleness came from his grandfather, the quiet came from his mother. Neither trait was valued in a ruler. His empress mother was sickly and prone to fits of nerves; she hailed from a family with no influence in court, and had few personal ambitions and even less of a backbone—

in this regard, she perfectly suited the Longan Emperor Li Feng's preferences. She was crowned empress because she held his imperial favor, but failed to unearth any hidden reservoir of willpower even after her ascent. Compared to Consort Lü and her son, the eldest prince, it seemed her greatest destiny was to become the unfortunate victim of harem schemes.

But fate is never so predictable a thing. When the young crown prince Li Zheng was a scant six or seven years of age, the peace he'd known until then was shattered, and the nation fell into turmoil.

Living deep in the palace as he did, Li Zheng's most vivid memories of those difficult years of war were that there was a year when his allowance was especially meager, and at the start of that summer, the capital was as hot as a furnace. The skies boiled with purple smoke in the west, and everyone within and without the palace walls had buzzed with anxiety. The faces of the palace maids and eunuchs had been solemn as they bustled in and out. He didn't see his father at all during those days. Confined to his mother's bedside as she lay sick in her chambers, he would often wake from his dreams in the middle of the night and overhear the servants talking in lowered voices. Their conversation never strayed far from the war.

The crown prince was too young then to understand what the adults spoke about. But he remembered the topic was always accompanied by his mother's quiet sobs.

As the young Li Zheng slowly grew up and began to understand the world around him, so did Great Liang's situation begin to improve. Later, there was a scandal in the court and Consort Lü's looming faction fell apart overnight. The Lü clan was charged with treason, and Consort Lü was stripped of her position and sent to the cold palace. Li Zheng's brother, the eldest prince, never recovered from this blow.

For a stretch of time, the Eastern Palace became a golden goose everyone wanted to claim. This was the first moment in which the crown prince began to comprehend, in his childish way, the ebb and flow of power, as inexorable as the

shifting tides. He decided he didn't like it. His Imperial Tutor hadn't yet reached these distasteful topics in the sages' texts he taught, but perhaps the young prince drew on some innate sensitivity that exceeded his physical years. He grew uneasy—to him, change meant upheaval. If there was a time when your doorstep was as busy as a marketplace, there too would come a time when it was deserted and left for sparrows to roost.

The Longan Emperor was not blessed with many children. The eldest prince was in disgrace, and the third prince was young and born to a mother from a lowly family. Everyone thought of Li Zheng as the heir apparent, the most favored child in all Great Liang—but before the boy himself could be infected with this fantasy, he watched his father die in a riot before his very eyes.

On that day, surrounded by clashing soldiers, the young crown prince had clutched his fourth uncle's hand. He still saw himself as a child, and he witnessed the true meaning of power with a child's clear eyes.

To the rest of Great Liang, a new emperor took the throne, marking the start of a new era and reign.

To the young crown prince, residing deep within the palace, his entire world collapsed.

The empress was a timid woman. She urged him to ingratiate himself with his fourth uncle—henceforth, their fates as a widow and fatherless child would rest wholly upon his uncle's kindness. None of the officials could say how long he could expect to keep his title as crown prince.

Li Zheng used to love being around his uncle Li Min. But in those days after he took the throne, he felt an oppressive pressure around his fourth uncle. His amiable and learned youngest uncle transformed overnight into His Majesty the Emperor, and he had to call his uncle by an entirely different title. Every day, the little crown prince braced himself to listen to political discussion he only half understood while appraising eyes weighed on him from all sides. Then, he braced himself again to pay his respects to his imperial uncle before returning to the Eastern Palace and bracing himself to listen to his mother's worried ramblings.

His mother was nowhere near as capable as Consort Lü. She hadn't a single idea of her own and transferred the unbearable pressure of their position entirely onto her son. All she had to offer were empty admonitions that he must make something of himself. What exactly he should make of himself—what kind of person she wished him to become—she had absolutely no idea.

Every person faced their own great challenges in youth. Gu Yun's challenge was the scattered Black Iron Battalion, and the Taishi Emperor Li Min's challenge was the frightful curse of the wu'ergu. The young crown prince Li Zheng's challenge was undoubtedly his own uncertain future.

Gu Yun had had thousands of windslashers and generations of ancestors venerated in the Gu family's ancestral hall standing behind him, and Chang Geng had had a young godfather watching over and guiding him. Li Zheng, by contrast, was surrounded by nothing but an endless haze of terror. There was no one to chart a path for him to take.

In the autumn of the fourth year of Taishi, after the first frost, Li Zheng's empress mother passed away suddenly amid the boundless fear and anxiety that was her life. The emperor tasked the Ministry of Rites with arranging a lavish funeral.

The fifteen-year-old crown prince had transformed from a quiet child into a young man who grew more taciturn by the day.

During the wake, Chang Geng dismissed the attendants and strolled into the room. Before Li Zheng could rise to salute him, Chang Geng placed a hand on his shoulder; Li Zheng didn't insist. At his mother's urging, he'd for years poured his energy into learning his fourth uncle's preferences. He knew his uncle didn't like when others insisted on etiquette in private.

"Your Majesty."

Chang Geng gave him a look. The youth abashedly corrected himself. "Uncle."

After offering him his condolences, Chang Geng turned and paid his respects to the sister-in-law he hadn't met more than a handful of times in his life with perfect etiquette.

He had risen again when the young crown prince, his recently changing voice cracking, spoke up beside him. "This subject has neither talent nor virtue, and cannot meet the demands of a position of power. Uncle, please strip me of my title as heir."

Chang Geng frowned, looking up at him.

His nephew's profile wasn't as imposing and dignified as his father's; it was too delicate. Li Zheng's face was pale and his frame was slight, his features shadowed by a lingering gloom. It was true that he didn't have the bearing of an imperial scion. His own words seemed to have frightened him; an anxious look stole over his face. By chance, a stiff breeze blew in through the cracked-open door to the ancestral hall, and the ornaments hanging below the steam-powered lamps clinked and collided with the memorial tablet placed on display, knocking it over. The crown prince shuddered.

With no change in expression, Chang Geng stood and respectfully set the memorial tablet to rights. He waved away the panicked palace attendants who had rushed in at the clatter and turned to his nephew. "The Imperial Tutor said your studies are progressing well. What brought this on?"

Li Zheng lowered his head, afraid to speak.

After a pause, Chang Geng continued, "When you were younger, you often chased after me, asking all kinds of questions. I even wove straw grasshoppers for you to play with. Why have you grown so distant these years?"

Li Zheng had no good answer. He mumbled, "There's a difference between a ruler and his subjects. This subject… I…"

On reflection, Li Zheng hadn't required anything from his youngest uncle back then. He'd simply liked him, so he'd had no reservations showing him affection. But these last years, although he still lived in the palace, he'd always felt that he was living beneath someone else's roof and relying on someone else's charity. When he spoke to his uncle now, there was an obsequiousness to his words and a note of caution in his actions; their relationship was too different. One look into Chang Geng's eyes told Li Zheng that his fourth uncle, who had saved this nation from the verge of collapse, saw everything as clearly as his reflection in a mirror. He felt more and more ashamed of himself.

“Stripping an heir of his title is no minor matter,” Chang Geng replied, his tone placid. “The nation has its laws. This isn’t something you or I can decide on a whim.”

Li Zheng’s face went red. It seemed he had been overthinking things.

“If there are certain things you feel you can’t say to me,” Chang Geng continued, “you can speak to the Marquis of Anding. He’ll be leaving the capital next month to carry out military inspections on all four borders. If you’re interested, why not ask him to bring you along for a look?”

Chang Geng chuckled at Li Zheng’s look of surprise. “When I was your age, I was also horribly confused. I had a big fight with my guardian at the time…that is, the Marquis of Anding. I ran away from home and traveled the entirety of Great Liang with Great Master Liao Ran and old General Zhong. I visited many places and I saw how the common people toiled for a living, as well as how villains and bandits ran rampant. Once you’ve seen enough of the vast sorrows and joys of the world, of life and death, partings and reunions, the worries stuffed inside your own heart seem small in comparison.”

No matter how little the crown prince understood about the workings of the nation, he knew the weight the Marquis of Order, keeper of the Black Iron Tiger Tally, held in the military and in court. When he was young, he had been awfully curious about this legendary hero and had nagged and pleaded with him for samples of his calligraphy. Later, he was too afraid to act so presumptuously. When his mother was alive, she had kept him sealed carefully away in the palace and forbidden him from associating with court officials, terrified her son would overstep somewhere or make himself a nuisance to the new emperor. Thus, Li Zheng had never again visited the Marquis Estate.

“Don’t be afraid; he adored you when you were little. Do you remember?” When Chang Geng spoke of Gu Yun, his expression unwittingly softened, and a gentle smile spread over his face.

The crown prince didn’t comprehend whom he was talking about at first. “M-Marshal Gu?”

Chang Geng strode off toward the doors of the ancestral hall. After a stunned moment, the crown prince hurried after him. Seeing that this uncle and nephew wished to speak in private, the attendants swiftly retreated to both sides. The newly ascended young emperor walked in front, hands clasped behind his back, and spoke frankly to Li Zheng. “I have no other candidates in mind for my heir. Some day in the future, I intend to pass the throne to you. By then, this will be a different nation. When you sit upon this throne, you may find that the word of this nation’s most honored ruler is no longer the last. The court, and even the entire world, will operate according to their own principles and the law above their heads. Ruler and subject, and subject and citizen, will check and balance each other… You may, someday, find yourself feeling like no more than a venerated puppet.”

This kind of talk was too radical. Li Zheng froze in shock.

Chang Geng tilted his head and looked at him. “I wonder if you can accept ruling a nation like this.”

“I…” Li Zheng began.

“You needn’t answer now.” Chang Geng smiled and pressed a palm to the top of the youth’s head. “Go see the outside world first, and come back once you’re

sure. If you really can't do it, I can adopt another child from the clan. Don't worry so much."

Chang Geng made to walk off on his own. He had only come to show his face at the wake; he had no intention of staying in the palace overnight.

"Your Ma… Uncle," Li Zheng called after him, "Don't you want a child of your own?"

"I've reached my final destination; I have no more regrets in life or in death. I don't need to leave any child of my blood behind." Chang Geng paused, then shook his head and laughed at the confused look on Li Zheng's face. "You wouldn't understand even if I told you. You'll get it when you're older."

Half a month later, the Taishi Emperor skillfully brushed aside all objections and granted the crown prince's request to accompany the Marquis of Anding on his inspection tour of the four borders. Li Zheng spent three months at Gu Yun's side, traveling every corner of the nation by air, water, and steam locomotive. He must have gotten a taste for it; afterward, he continued to find excuses to leave the capital, spending more than half of each year outside the palace.

Three years later, when Li Zheng turned eighteen, he visited the former Prince Yan Estate—now the Imperial Manor—and spent an entire night conversing with Chang Geng. He wore his uncle down until Chang Geng finally conceded to let him take a bevy of guards and join the seafaring merchant convoy led by Young Master Du, traveling to even more distant lands beyond the sea.

This merchant convoy was perhaps more than it seemed. It was escorted by several dozen sea dragon ships and dragonets, and aside from Young Master Du and his entourage, the crown prince was also joined by elite sailors selected from Great Liang's navy, as well as a group of experts from the Linyuan Pavilion working under Cao Chunhua and Liao Ran. In addition to goods for trade, they carried letters of credence and terms for negotiating treaties with foreign nations. They traveled from east to west, sailed the seven seas, and only returned home five years later.

Upon Li Zheng's return, he often joked that his mediocre talents and average intelligence would never rank among the most outstanding of the house of Li—but out of all of them, it was surely he who had roamed the farthest.

In the eighteenth year of Taishi, Gu Yun returned the Black Iron Tiger Tally to the throne and requested to retire. Several months later, the crown prince Li Zheng accepted the throne from his venerated uncle. He abolished the practice of era names, established a new calendar that would be accurate across all the seven seas, and sailed ahead into the new era of reform that had found its footing after eighteen years of fumbling.

For so long as the mountains and rivers remained unchanged, peace reigned over the land.

Extra:
A Depth of Affection

SHEN YI'S LITTLE daughter Shen Yan was born at the tail end of summer, when her elder brother, Chen An, was eight years old.

Neither the Shen nor the Chen family counted many members among their households, so a child was a major source of celebration. An infant was taxing enough, and the endless stream of social calls that followed might push anyone to fantasize about dropping everything and running away. Being called upon by friends was one thing, but then there were endless court sycophants come to capitalize upon the opportunity for flattery, the jianghu wanderers who wished to strengthen ties with the miracle doctor's clan…

Chen Qingxu was still in confinement and couldn't meet with guests, and Shen Yi was a people-pleaser who struggled to deal with everyone on his own.

Thus, on the day of the little girl's third-day bathing ceremony, Gu Yun showed up with a menacing escort of two dozen Black Steeds and light-armored cavalrymen to personally ward against social nuisances.

Black Hawks landed at the four corners of General Shen's estate in perfect synchrony, startling the birds that had been flying over the residence into swerving in an abrupt detour. Gu Yun marched inside, brazen as any bandit, and tossed his helm to a nearby servant before casting his eyes around the room. "I was in such a hurry," he laughed. "I didn't even have the time to remove my armor. But look, I made it in time to celebrate this joyous occasion with my venerated companions. Here, I'll drink three cups as punishment… Hey, my friend there, why are you hiding up in the rafters? Come down, let's have a good time together—"

Under the marquis's watchful eye, the Shen Estate returned to its usual peaceful state in short order.

Seeing that all the busybodies had fled, Gu Yun whistled for the Black Hawks to come down. The black crows removed their helmets, revealing themselves to be not Gu Yun's personal guards, but a few of their old comrades from the Black Iron Battalion.

The soldiers gave Shen Yi their hearty congratulations as they followed him into the hall amid rowdy laughter. Spotting the young Chen An hovering by the doorway, Gu Yun scooped him up with one arm and tossed him into the air. "You're a big brother now, little squirt; are you excited?"

"Uncle Gu." Arms around Gu Yun's neck, Chen An slid down his light armor and muttered something, but the exuberance of the soldiers drowned the boy's voice.

Gu Yun didn't notice. He patted the child on the head and strode inside to remove his armor—he was going to meet the baby later, and it wouldn't do to scare her. The way he saw it, becoming an older brother through no effort of one's own was an excellent deal. Why wouldn't a kid be excited? Gu Yun would have given his mother a few extra kowtows every year for the gift of a little brother or sister to play with.

Chen An shuffled after him out of habit, then froze again on the spot. Every uncle mussed his hair on the way in, passing him by.

To an eight-year-old child, these soldiers were much too big and tall; he had to crane his neck just to see their faces. None of the adults glanced down as they joked around with each other, so little Chen An often felt as if he had been abandoned out of sight… Somehow, the feeling was especially strong tonight.

He wasn't excited. In fact, his heart felt like lead in his chest. But the whole house sparkled with a celebratory atmosphere, and his upset seemed entirely illogical. Chen An stared down at the toes of his little boots until he felt his eyes begin to sting. A hand settled lightly on the back of his head.

Who is it now?

Chen An stared at the ground in hot frustration. All the guests today were his parents' friends, so it was fine if he wasn't polite… Besides, this was just another cursory pat before an uncle went on their way.

But after a long while, the hand never left his head. The cool scent of mint and medicinal herbs rose from the man's sleeve in the summer heat, coiling around the two of them. Chen An looked up and nearly jumped out of his skin in fright. "Your Ma—"

Chang Geng, in casual clothing today, gave him a look. After a moment, Chen An let his head droop and muttered, "Uncle Li."

A few steps away, the hall was dazzlingly lit, festive as a New Year's celebration. The soldiers jostled elbows and teased their comrade, now the proud father of both a son and a daughter.

Chang Geng didn't rush over to join them. He stood with little Chen An in the small courtyard, where the ancient trees of the Shen Estate blocked both the lantern and the moonlight. A pair of shadows, one long and one short, stood in the shelter of their branches.

"You're not happy?"

Chen An shook his head in instinctive denial, then paused, letting his head hang in a tacit admission.

This child—if Gu Yun was to be believed, his temperament was much like Shen Yi's when he was younger: sensitive and apt to quietly overthink things.

Chang Geng couldn't say he saw the resemblance. Perhaps General Shen had made a mistake in his youth hanging around with that Gu bastard all day. Whatever he had been like originally, stepping into the vicious cycle of getting in trouble, ending up the scapegoat, and exploding in anger had caused him to grow up malformed.

"Are you afraid your mom and dad will only care for your little sister now and won't have any time for you?"

"That's not it. I'm their son; they won't forget me," Chen An said, quiet. "My sister is just a baby; of course she needs more attention. When I was born, my uncles must have celebrated like this too." His words were mature and sensible. Even as an eight-year-old child, he would have seemed more grown-up than every soldier in the house if not for how he tugged dejectedly on Chang Geng's sleeve as he continued, "I just… I just…"

Chang Geng softly finished, “Oh… You’re just a little lonely.”

Chen An murmured his assent. He tilted his head to listen to the gathering inside the hall, then said, morose, “It seems like I’m the only one who’s like this. Uncle Li, am I too petty? This isn’t the conduct of a man of character—hey!”

Chang Geng had rapped him lightly on the forehead. “Get taller than my chest before you worry about being a ‘man of character,’” Chang Geng laughed. “No two people are the same. For some people, it isn’t their nature to dwell on such things. But in this, you and I are quite similar.”

Chen An looked up at him with wide eyes.

“I never lived with my birth parents when I was little, so I don’t know what it’s like to have a sibling. But when I saw the people I cared about with other close friends, it always made me a bit uncomfortable,” Chang Geng said slowly. He raised his palm level with the top of Chen An’s head. “I was like that when I was as tall as you, and I’m sometimes like that even now.”

Although Chen An was young, he knew who Chang Geng was. He would never dare accuse Uncle Li of not being a man of character. “Th-then what do I do?”

Inside, Gu Yun had likely realized Chang Geng should have arrived by now. He diverted his attention from the cacophony of clinking cups and shot a glance or two out the door. Chang Geng took a half step out from behind the tree trunk to let Gu Yun see him. Relieved, Gu Yun turned back to the party. Then, as if he’d realized something, he coughed and casually set his bottle of wine back down.

Chang Geng’s eyes curved up at the corners. “You don’t need to do anything. Just remember they’re always thinking of you. You’ll get used to it in time. It’s no problem.”

As he said these last words, a servant ran over and offered him a polite salute, then took Chen An from his care.

“Hold on—one of these is for you.” Chang Geng pulled two longevity lock necklaces of different sizes from his pouch and handed them to Chen An. “The other is for your sister. Go ahead and bring it to her.”

“Mine is bigger!” Chen An exclaimed.

“You had a little one too when you were born. When your sister gets to your size, we’ll get a bigger one for her too.”

Chen An blinked. “Then, will I get an even bigger one…”

Chang Geng rapped him on the forehead again. “You wish. How old will you be by then? It’ll be time for you to be a ‘man of character.’ You won’t be begging for any longevity necklaces,” he teased. “Go on and get some sleep. Watch out—if you don’t sleep enough when you’re a kid, you might never grow into a man of character when you’re older.”

Chen An stuck his tongue out at him, then put the longevity necklaces away with great care before following the servant to his rooms.

Chang Geng’s sharp ears caught the servant rambling as they walked away, “The general said the young master didn’t eat much at the banquet, so he asked us to heat up some milk porridge; you should have some before bed…”

Startled, Chen An cast a glance at his father, who had been surrounded by people all day, then turned back toward Chang Geng. Chang Geng waved at him and walked into the hall.

The family feast in the Shen Estate continued late into the night. Afraid to make things awkward for the others, Chang Geng had only stayed briefly and spoken a few words to Miss Chen through the wall in the rear courtyard before taking his leave. Gu Yun had arrived on horseback, but when the gathering was over, he headed straight for a nondescript carriage parked in the back alley.

Upon opening the carriage door, Gu Yun hissed at the wall of cold air that hit him, then snatched the basin of ice cooling the interior away from Chang Geng. "If you're going to keep it that close, you might as well cuddle the thing. Why are you using so much ice when summer's almost over? Don't be so greedy."

"You're one to talk…" Chang Geng laughed, then rolled up the scroll he was holding and rapped on the front of the carriage.

The carriage trundled forward as the two of them talked of this and that, until Chang Geng suddenly remembered. "That's right—Xiao-An was a little jealous today."

Gu Yun had been leaning against the side of the carriage resting his eyes, but at this, he opened them and gave Chang Geng a mystified look. "Ah?"

"I knew it." In a tone of fond exasperation, Chang Geng quickly recounted how Chen An had been stewing in secret. "The little guy thought no one else was like that, that he was the only one. What was it again… 'Pettiness is not the conduct of a man of character'? Who taught him such grown-up words, I wonder?"

"I was curious why you stood out in the courtyard so long—what did you tell him?"

"What *could* I tell him? I just gave him a little encouragement. It'll be up to his parents to keep things fair in the future." Chang Geng smiled. "Actually, I think I'm quite like him in this respect. We're both—"

"Sincere."

Chang Geng started in surprise. "What?"

"However challenging it is for heavy armor to turn in its tracks, it's even more so for deep water to change its course." Gu Yun reclined in his seat with a lazy tilt of his head, fixing his full attention on Chang Geng. "Silly kids who are deep and honest in their affections always take a bit longer adjusting to a new person in their lives."

"…How come I never thought to put it that way?" Chang Geng asked. He quietly averted his gaze, the base of his ears going a magnificent shade of scarlet.

Extra:
Homecoming

WINTER WAS MILD in Jiangnan; some of the hardier plants even remained green. But for some reason, travel during this season still felt bitter, as if it wasn't much warmer than the capital's snowstorms and blowing frost.

A caravan of steam carriages traveled along the road, escorted by a dozen or so riders on horseback. The carriages at the back of the caravan held goods, while the one in the lead carried passengers. A colorful little bell hung from the curtain, tinkling as the window was pushed open by an eight- or nine-year-old girl. She poked her head out, then called to the rider in the lead, "Daddy, are we late?"

The man pushed up his visor. He was comfortably middle-aged, with a lean face and fine wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Perhaps because he spent his youth in the military, he looked rather severe at first glance. But his face softened at once as he turned toward the girl. "We're not late. Sit down and don't stick your head out, you'll catch a cold in this wind—and tell your mom to slow down, your dad's old bones can't keep up."

A woman sat inside the carriage. It was impossible to guess her age from her appearance, but she was dressed in the style of a married woman. She laughed and tapped the back of the iron puppet driving the carriage; their speed noticeably slowed. Bringing out a qin and placing it across her lap, she began to pluck out a leisurely tune between jostling bumps of the carriage.

The carefree notes of "Plum Blossom Melody" spilled back along the tracks their wheels left behind on the road.

It was New Year's Eve, in the second year of the young emperor's new calendar.

Shen Yi had been in Jiangnan performing an inspection of the local garrison. Since he couldn't make it home for the New Year's holiday, he had sent for his wife and daughter instead. The whole family was going to Greenhaven to celebrate the holiday and sponge a free meal.

Located in Jiangnan, Greenhaven, also known as the Gu Haven, was the villa Gu Yun had bought from the former Taishi Emperor using war beacon tickets purchased by the Marquis of Anding's estate. On reflection, Gu Yun had struck a truly terrible deal. After haggling for the villa, it still half-belonged to the former emperor in the end, and it was also His Majesty who made all the final decisions in the household.

But Marshal Gu had always been careless about his personal property, and this wouldn't be the first time he had failed to do his math. One imagined he was used to getting screwed over.

Shen Yi and his party reached Greenhaven that evening.

The villa was backed by mountains and bordered by water. Its rows of steam-powered lamps could be seen all the way down the road. Perhaps because they were celebrating the new year, all had been fitted with red lampshades. Each cast a warm little halo of light, a lovely sight from a distance. In lieu of a straight road, a series

of waterside pavilions led to the front gate. Guests were invited to walk through a meandering floating corridor, while carriages took the long way around and would be parked elsewhere. A pavilion for welcoming guests was situated along this winding avenue. Hanging curtains blocked the wind while steam puffed from braziers and billowed across the water so that the pavilion looked as if it was floating above the clouds.

Shen Yi's personal guard went ahead to deliver a calling card. Before he could finish announcing himself, a hand brushed aside the curtain. "You arrived before I could finish my first cup of tea," the man said with a laugh, striding out.

Jumping in shock, Shen Yi hurriedly dismounted his steed. The figure who had stepped out of the pavilion had hair like ink-dyed silk and held his hands primly behind his back—the former emperor himself. No matter how bold Shen Yi might be, he didn't dare make the former emperor wait on him. He scrambled over to salute, but before he could bend at the waist, Chang Geng impatiently gestured for him to rise and called out to his little daughter, Shen Yan.

Shen Yan didn't give a fig for her dad's etiquette. She happily ran over with a cry of, "Uncle Li!"

Chang Geng looked at Shen Yi with the shadow of a smile. "You old stick in the mud—Yan-er, come, are you cold? Where's your dage?"

"Little Uncle Ge kidnapped dage!" Shen Yan pronounced.

After Master Fenghan had retired, the Lingshu Institute fell into the hands of Ge Chen. Shen Yi's eldest son had inherited every bit of his father's rebellious, unreliable love of engines. Now sixteen years of age, he had neither scholarly nor military achievements to his name. He had spent his childhood rolling around with iron puppets, and eventually rolled all the way to the Lingshu Institute, becoming Ge Chen's disciple.

Chang Geng took the little girl's hand. "What did he kidnap him for?" he teased.

Shen Yan held her hands wide. "They're making a new great condor."

Chang Geng chuckled, then pulled out a Far Western-style mirror with a wooden frame. It was carved in the shape of a peacock, every feature rendered in lifelike detail. One wing had a little sliding door, behind which was a slot for one of a set of tiny paintings. The paintings seemed to take inspiration from the gongbi realist style, but also bore a resemblance to Far Western paintings—perhaps some unidentifiable fusion of the two. Either way, they were exquisite.

"Your dage is making a great big bird, so Uncle Li will give you a miniature one," Chang Geng said. "The peacock is the king of all birds. When Yan-er grows up, you'll have to be a lot more accomplished than your dage."

When Shen Yan was small, her parents were often away from the capital; if neither of them could take her along, they would bring her to the Marquis of Anding's estate. Until the age of five, she grew up half under Chang Geng's watch. She never adhered to formalities around the former emperor, and gladly accepted whatever he gave her, smiling so wide her eyes curved into slits.

Thinking the trinket was some tribute from the Far Westerners, Shen Yi said, "Children don't know the value of things. Your Majesty, you mustn't give her anything too precious…"

“Not at all. My better half made this himself in an idle moment.” Chang Geng waved him off. “He wanted to come out and welcome everyone, but he’s caught a bit of a cold, so I told him to stay in. Jiping-xiong, please don’t fault him.”

Shen Yi snarked to himself, *That guy lazes around at home and shoos the former emperor out to welcome their guests. Yet who would dare find fault with him?*

Chen Qingxu glanced at her daughter’s new toy, then at the wooden hairpin in the former emperor’s hair. The hairpin was carved in a style identical to that of the peacock’s plumes, clearly the work of the same hand. She studied Chang Geng’s outfit—unremarkable at first glance, but upon closer inspection, every detail was carefully considered. This was a style noble young masters used to favor: wanton extravagance expressed in the subtlest ways.

She smiled. “Your Majesty revolutionized the old and brought in the new, drawing a new sky over our heads. There are strange new fashions sweeping the nation every year, in such numbers it’s impossible to keep up. The old aristocratic styles, with the painstaking effort and careful consideration they require, are seen so rarely now. Everyone is atwitter with the fresh and novel, yet it is Your Majesty who has preserved the most authentic traditional styles.”

Chang Geng looked down at himself, helpless amusement spreading over his face. He shook his head. “Since when have I ever cared for these things?”

Indeed—Chen Qingxu still remembered what His Majesty had been like as a young man traveling the jianghu. He carried two or three changes of clothes in order to maintain some semblance of presentability, but he was a village-boy-turned-emperor in the end. Deep down, he was never particular about fashion. Chen Qingxu ducked her head with a smile. She knew this must be another one of a certain someone’s domestic hobbies.

Gu Yun was a peculiar sort of person.

On the one hand, he was good at making do. He had spent long stretches of his youth on the borders marching with the troops, where one got by with what one had. He could swallow down iron-hard flour cakes and half-cooked, bloody strips of meat without flinching, or fall asleep on a bed of hay with a rat for company in the imperial dungeons and never bat an eye.

But just because he could rough it when necessary didn’t mean that was his natural inclination. Gu Yun had been born with all the potential to grow into a playboy young master. Even if it had been beaten back by circumstance, that sprout of extravagance was still one that would grow big and strong if allowed the slightest ray of sunlight. Given the opportunity to meddle, his efforts would surely bear fruit. Everything in Greenhaven, from the pavilions at the gate requiring guests to dismount their horses and carriages to the inner gazebos encircled by winding brooks; the plum groves that released their lovely fragrance as one promenaded through the snow; the kites upon which one could ascend high into the air and view the spread vista beneath; the interlocking eaves of covered corridors curving between rockeries…was exquisite in every detail.

Most of the plaques around the villa were in Gu Yun’s own handwriting, and some were accompanied by small poems composed by Chang Geng. These two had certainly been making the most of their leisure time.

It was nothing like what Shen Yi remembered of the old Marquis Estate, which had been as abandoned as a haunted house. Shen Yi clucked his tongue. *Thank goodness the old marquis was so strict with him. If he allowed this man to follow his natural instincts, what sort of frivolous popinjay would he have grown into?*

"Uncle Li," Shen Yan asked, "what are they doing up there?"

She pointed up at the rooftop, where a giant iron puppet the height of two men was installed. It was only a skeleton, with most of its outer plates not yet attached, and several people were orbiting around it in a flurry of movement.

Chang Geng followed her pointing finger and blanched. "Gu Zixi, get down from there!"

One of the figures on the roof turned and tossed him a smile. It was Gu Yun, undignified as ever in middle age. Aside from some streaks of silver at his temples, he'd scarcely changed after all these years. It was clear he had been very well taken care of indeed.

Gu Yun was directing the people on the roof as they tinkered with the half-assembled iron puppet. His eyes lit up when they fell upon little Shen Yan, but before he could call out a greeting, cries of alarm sounded behind him, followed by a sharp gust of wind. Someone had accidentally triggered one of the mechanisms on the puppet, and it began to spin in place. The meter-long iron-boned fan in its hand sliced toward Gu Yun's waist.

"Aiya!" Shen Yan cried out in shock.

Lightning quick, Gu Yun bent backward at the waist, the fan brushing his sash as it whipped over him. He turned, leapt down from the roof, and landed lightly on the ground with a swish of his hems. Shen Yan gaped, and Gu Yun picked her up and spun her in a circle. "Little beauty, look how much you've grown!"

Shen Yan scrunched up her face.

Gu Yun swept a fingertip over the bridge of her nose. "But you didn't get even a tael heavier. Is your dad starving you with his miserly ways?"

Hearing she'd grown up tall and slender, the little girl grinned.

After charming her daughter, Gu Yun looked up at Chen Qingxu. "And Miss Chen, how are you?"

Chen Qingxu had a steady temperament and had never liked being pandered to. But it was impossible to overstate how satisfying it was to hear herself called "Miss Chen"—when she had just married Shen Yi, Chen Qingxu was happy enough to hear "young madam," but it had been almost twenty years since then. Her son would soon be old enough to head a household of his own, and she ran the risk of going from "young madam" to "old madam."

Although "madam" was dignified, could anything beat "miss" in youthful freshness?

Chen Qingxu offered him a rare smile. "Good, thank you for asking."

After thoroughly flattering the two ladies with a few words, Gu Yun turned and gave Shen Yi a cursory pat on the shoulder.

Shen Yi hadn't received a speck of sincerity from this man in years. He scoffed. "So you do remember I exist. I'm honored, sir."

By this time, Huo Dan had trotted out to usher their guests inside. Gu Yun, a few steps behind, was about to start after the others when Chang Geng snatched his wrist. “A certain *someone* told me his back hurt last night, and he couldn’t be touched,” Chang Geng murmured into his ear. “Yet you look to be in excellent shape tearing up the rooftops today, hm?”

Gu Yun rubbed his nose. “Uhh… It hurt yesterday, but it’s better now. People must refresh themselves anew each day so as not to let beautiful sights and wonderful times pass them by, don’t you agree?”

He felt a hand drag its way deliberately down his spine, then trail over his waist. Chang Geng smiled stiffly. “It’s just as Yifu says.”

Gu Yun felt himself shudder. He sensed this day wouldn’t end well for him. “It’s New Year’s Eve; we have to stay up tonight,” he said. “If you want payback, save it for later.”

Chang Geng casually pulled his hand away. “Did I say I was going to do anything?”

Gu Yun went silent.

Shen Yan turned and yelled, “Uncle Gu, hurry up!”

“Don’t run so fast, you’ll fall!” Gu Yun called back.

On New Year’s Eve, the grounds of Greenhaven were lit as bright as day. The curious Shen Yan finally got to see what the iron puppet on the roof was for—assembled with a slim figure and draped in a long-sleeved dancer’s dress, the massive thing looked exactly like a bright and shining shadow puppet from a distance. The fan that had nearly sliced Gu Yun in two was wrapped in several meters of silk, and as it spun around and around in a cloud of billowing steam, lit by gas lamps anchored to the roof, it looked like a legendary beauty putting on a magnificent show.

The kite in the courtyard, strung with lanterns on both ends, hovered like a giant lotus flower in the sky. As night fell, firecrackers popped in the surrounding villages, growing louder by the minute until everyone had to shout to be heard even when indoors.

This place that had been deserted and desolate twenty years ago had fully recovered its vitality with the efforts of one generation.

Unlike the shallow displays of prosperity in the capital, the banquet held in Greenhaven was a proper family feast. The four adults and one child sent away the servants and sat around a small furnace, warming their own wine and cooking their own meat.

Gu Yun had been permitted three cups of wine for the evening. Only on holidays could he convince Chang Geng to allow him this much. He treasured the rare opportunity, savoring every mouthful and chasing every last drop. When he reached out again after his three cups were up, Chang Geng pinned his hand to the table in a practiced motion and shot him a subtle look of warning. Eyes slightly red at the corners from the warm wine, Gu Yun looked at him with the hint of a smile curving his lips, coaxing him to relent.

Chang Geng was too weak to this kind of look. He averted his gaze, refusing to fall for Gu Yun’s tricks.

“Don’t make eyes at each other in front of my daughter.” Shen Yi sniped at Gu Yun.

It was already late. Shen Yan yawned as she curled up in Chen Qingxu’s arms. The former emperor coughed and pulled his hand away, turning toward her with a genial look. “Yan-er, are you tired? Go ahead and sleep.”

Shen Yan rubbed her eyes. “I want to stay up; I haven’t even had dumplings yet.”

Gu Yun laughed and called for a servant to make a quick pot of dumplings for the girl. He took two windslashers from the weapons rack in the courtyard and tossed one to Shen Yi. “Jiping, let’s have a quick spar to keep my niece awake. I want to see how you’ve regressed.”

Neither of them released their windslashers’ blades. The sound of the black iron staffs crashing against each other echoed through the chilly night air. Shen Yan twitched and woke up at once, sticking her head out to watch the fight.

Gu Yun struck quickly and danced back, hopping across the carved railings and the corridor before leaping, sparrow-like, onto the roof of the building across the way. Shen Yi followed a step behind. Rather than sparring, it was better to say they were play-acting to give the girl a show. Neither of them went all-out, instead using their ominous weapons to perform all sorts of tricks. Up on the rooftop, Gu Yun leapt onto the fan in the hand of that still-spinning iron puppet, its colorful silk blooming beneath his feet. Opting to play dirty, Shen Yi thrust his windslasher forward, wedging the tip between the teeth of the gears on the puppet’s shoulder. With a quiet *click*, the iron puppet froze in perfect time with a pause in the guqin music drifting over from the front courtyard.

“You bastard,” Gu Yun cursed cheerfully. Just as he and the iron puppet looked as if they would lose their balance, he stomped down with just enough force to dislodge Shen Yi’s windslasher. The iron fan swept right at Shen Yi’s face, and Shen Yi deftly bent to dodge as if he’d expected it. He retreated a few steps, landing on the other side of the puppet. Following the rhythm of the music, the two combatants moved in unison, manipulating the iron puppet like a toy and making it dance and stop on command. It hit every beat with immaculate timing, as if alive.

Shen Yan’s tiredness was completely forgotten. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the show.

A chain of fireworks burst somewhere in the distance, and the silhouettes of the two fighters and their iron puppet nearly disappeared into the sparks.

Chen Qingxu shook her head with a smile. “These generals are like two monkeys. For shame.”

“Is it not a good omen that the keen blades used to stake claim to our borders and defend our state are now used for play?” Chang Geng set down his cup of wine and retrieved the Linyuan wooden tablet from his sleeve. Only two pieces of its original five remained; he removed one and handed it to Chen Qingxu. “When I left the capital, I returned the pieces belonging to Great Master Liao Ran and the Du family. Master Fenghan wrote in his will that Ge Chen was to take up his mantle, so I gave his piece to Xiao-Ge. The Chen family’s piece should also return to its rightful owner. As for the one belonging to General Zhong, I’ll keep it for now. Once I find a suitable candidate, I’ll pass it on.”

“It seems the Linyuan tablet will disappear for another several centuries,” Chen Qingxu said, accepting the token.

“Ideally, several millennia,” Chang Geng replied.

They tucked away their wooden tokens and clinked their cups in a toast, sealing away a great beast beside that little New Year’s furnace.

Extra:
Mid-Autumn Festival

ALTHOUGH MASTER FENGHAN had spent most of his lifetime with engines and dogs as his sole companions, he had also made it unscathed through the reigns of two unreliable emperors. The hot blood of passion coursing through his chest had been ground down and stifled but never spilled in the end. When his nation nearly fell into enemy hands, he pressed his ill-tempered and stubborn old bones into service holding up the spirit of Lingshu.

"Unfortunately—pah." Gu Yun put aside his Black Hawk armor as he spat out a mouthful of sand with no change in expression. "He has no worthy successor. This Ge Pangxiao's as unreliable as Cao Niangzi and Master Fenghan put together—kid, are you okay? Do you need me to carry you?"

The little Lingshu scholar beside him nearly cried from fright at the offer, terrified to trouble the Marquis of Order so. Limping along, he shook his head as fast as a spinning fire pinion.

Before them stretched the boundless, unpopulated grasslands beyond the border pass, and behind them was a pile of scrap charred beyond recognition. The Marquis of Order shielded his eyes and squinted toward the sun, then flapped his hand in exasperation. "I know this place; follow me. I must have been bored stupid to join you brats in your games instead of eating and drinking well in the capital."

As for how he'd come to join them, it was a long story.

As the Mid-Autumn Festival approached, Marshal Gu, presently on an inspection patrol of the borders, was delayed a few days by some minor affairs. By the time he was ready to depart, it was only two days before the holiday. The steam railway was still under construction in this part of the west; if he wanted to make it back in time to celebrate with Chang Geng, it would be on the wings of Black Hawk armor.

Of course, Chang Geng would never allow Gu Yun to tire himself like that. The emperor had planned for this exact scenario and found an excuse to be away from the capital on an inspection tour, sending a messenger to tell Gu Yun not to hurry back.

The nation had been at peace for years, and with Gu Yun keeping watch over the four borders, there were no wars to fight. The Lingshu Institute had been freed to pour all their passion into a series of pet projects. They had created a cross between the Black Hawks and giant kites, a yet-unnamed prototype that they'd been testing in the sparsely populated northwestern border regions. It had a similar look to the wooden birds the Linyuan Pavilion used to deliver messages—round and sturdy, with a belly large enough to carry more than twenty Black Carapaces.

Upon hearing that the Lingshu Institute was dicking around out in the northwest, the idle Marshal Gu grew too curious to sit still and took a trip out to observe.

Ge Chen was gesturing dramatically as he showed off his latest contraption to the Marquis of Anding. “Now those giant kites, they could be late to their own funeral. A single trip beyond the pass takes half a year; they’re slow and they guzzle violet gold. What use do they have beyond intimidating some foreigners? Hawks are very fast, but they’re a one-man job and have limited carrying capacity. Not just anyone can fly them, and long journeys are hard on their pilots. This new ship has both speed and carrying capacity. We could even adapt it for civilian use in the future; it’d be just the thing for carrying rich idiots like Old Du. Marquis, you’ve come at the right time. We’ve just concluded a successful test flight. Would you like to take it for a spin?”

Gu Yun was used to flying Black Hawk armor hither and yon and figured it was just a flight. He wouldn’t be getting scammed or wasting his money, so he happily accepted the invitation.

Yet somehow, he’d managed to joyride himself right into trouble on a holiday of all days.

Black Hawk armor required its operator to maintain their own equilibrium, but this big-bellied wooden bird was controlled by a pilot. In this instance, the pilot in question was a little Lingshu scholar who couldn’t have been more than nineteen and scarcely dared to breathe in Gu Yun’s presence. He looked the opposite of reliable. Peering at the boy’s round little face, Marshal Gu felt suddenly hesitant—but he’d barely settled in his seat when the wooden bird shot into the sky like a parhelion arrow. The thing had a bulging belly, but it wasn’t much slower than a Black Hawk, launching into the sky with a screech like the cry of a wild bird as it winged into the unpopulated wilderness.

It was unlike the giant kites, which sailed with a gentle swaying motion, and also unlike Black Hawk armor, which flew at such speeds the cold wind scraped across one’s face even with the visor down. It was a joyful experience of its own kind, and Gu Yun was sold as soon as they finished their first lap. He urged the little Lingshu scholar to fly them higher and farther.

What they didn’t expect was to encounter a real bird passing by as they sailed through the clouds. At the sight of this technological monstrosity, the poor thing thought it had caught sight of an ancestor that had cultivated into a great spirit in broad daylight. Stunned, the hapless creature forgot to flap its wings and crashed right into them.

In order to reduce the weight of the vessel, the wooden bird wasn’t nearly as sturdy as Black Hawks. The velocity of their collision sent the little sparrow crashing through the fire pinions on both wings, and the gold tank promptly exploded in a shower of fireworks. Gu Yun was nearly thrown from the ship’s belly. The ship, which moments ago had seemed as if it could fly straight up into heaven, began to plummet, plunging northward and trailing a thick plume of dark smoke.

Thankfully, a set of hawk armor had been stowed in the tail of the wooden bird. At the last second, Gu Yun grabbed the Lingshu scholar, tore open the bird’s belly, and leapt from the craft before it cratered into the ground. But his ill luck didn’t end there: this hawk armor was old and in disrepair; it couldn’t bear the weight of two people. With enormous effort, Gu Yun managed to steady it and glide several hundred meters, skimming the ground before a thunderous *boom* sounded behind them.

The trim wooden bird had become a scorched sparrow.

Poor, unfortunate Ge Chen waited for hours before coming to terms with the fact that the Marquis of Order had indeed flown off into the sunset on a little bird, never to return. Scared to tears, he ordered someone to write an urgent memorial to Chang Geng, then tore off into the north on horseback to look for the lost Marquis of Anding.

"Giant kites are slow, but they don't drop out of the sky." Gu Yun removed a wing panel from the hawk armor with deft fingers and handed it to the little Lingshu scholar to use as a walking stick. "Come here, I'll help you. Hey, I don't bite. You don't need to be so scared."

The little scholar wasn't yet twenty; he had still been a child when Gu Yun defended the capital with his life and recovered the nation's four borders. He had grown up listening to tales of the Marquis of Order's legendary deeds and never imagined he would one day meet the man in the flesh…much less nearly be smashed to bits with him. He was agitated beyond measure, and tentatively allowed Gu Yun to help him walk, afraid to take a single breath as his legs went weak with lack of oxygen.

"Hey." Seeing the little scholar wilt to the side, Gu Yun grabbed him by the back of the collar. "I say, is the Lingshu Institute restricting your rations? Why are you so weak at your age?"

They had glided some distance after the wooden bird took damage and crash-landed in an inconvenient location. Their flight had very likely taken them past the borders of Great Liang, and now that their wooden bird had gone up in flames, it was best they left as soon as possible to avoid unnecessary trouble. But there was a limit to how fast Gu Yun could move dragging dead weight like this Lingshu scholar behind him. The two of them spent a whole day plodding through unpopulated grass plains.

The little scholar knew he was a burden. He felt unbearably awkward about it and wished increasingly that he could dig a hole and bury himself alive. As the sun began to sink in the west, he was near to tears. "M-Marquis Gu, what if you left me and went on ahead? You can send someone to pick me up later, I… I…"

"Oh dear, don't start crying on me now." Gu Yun had joined the army at fifteen; he'd never met such a crybaby. At a loss, he pointed in a random direction and said, "Look, there's something over there!"

Although Gu Yun had been cured of the barbarian poison, it was impossible to reverse the accumulated damage of years. His eyesight was still poor in the dark, and he proceeded after sundown by intuition alone. He hadn't seen a thing, and was merely trying to comfort the kid. But when the little scholar heard, he wiped his eyes and cried out, "My lord, I see lights!"

Gu Yun was speechless.

As the two of them walked on, the scenery grew more and more familiar. Signs of life appeared around them, and when Gu Yun saw the underground river flowing toward the little town from the north, he halted in his tracks.

They had arrived in Yanhui Town.

The little town of Yanhui had transformed in the years since Gu Yun had last seen it. The original town was now part of the trade region along the border, and many of the old residents had moved eight kilometers south. The shores of the underground river bustled with merchants from the north and south—this was no longer the impoverished middle-of-nowhere town he had known. Without a thought as to whether someone might recognize him on the street, Gu Yun found a tiny medical clinic, dropped off the young scholar with his injured leg, and went out to wander the streets. On the shores of the underground river, he spotted a peddler selling sweet osmanthus cakes. Recalling how Chang Geng had loved them when he traveled through Jiangnan in his youth, he strolled over and bought a few.

Next, curiosity piqued by the crowds flocking in the direction of General's Slope—he remembered the locals used to think it haunted—he followed the throng, eager to see what was going on.

At some point, a little shrine had been erected on the once-abandoned mound. Travelers coming to offer incense flowed in and out in an unending stream.

Gu Yun found a peddler selling incense sticks and candles. "Whose shrine is this? What deity are they worshiping?"

"They're worshiping a mountain deity." The peddler gestured enthusiastically. "Sir, is this your first time here? Then you won't have heard the story—this hill is General's Slope, the most famous landmark in our Yanhui Town. When the three divisions of the Black Iron Battalion returned victorious from battle, they abandoned their broken armor here, piling it into a mound. Marshal Gu himself captured Jialai Yinghuo alive right here in Yanhui Town, and it's also here that he recovered the fourth prince—our current emperor. It's said His Majesty often trained with his sword here on General's Slope in his youth. Just think: this slope is protected by the three divisions of the Black Iron Battalion and carries the vital energy of the imperial dragon. With such a connection to His Majesty, aren't prayers offered here guaranteed to be heard?"

Feeling rather honored by association, Gu Yun nodded. "Right, of course they'd be heard."

Making the most of Gu Yun's attention, the peddler continued, "Buy some incense and offer a prayer, sir. Your wishes are sure to come true."

"You know, I think I'll do just that." Amused, Gu Yun rummaged for his spare change, planning to offer up a few prayers to the vital energy of the imperial dragon his Chang Geng had left behind. As he groped around in his pouch, he asked, "What are they praying for, high placement in the imperial examinations? Since it's called General's Slope, it's probably better for the martial examinations than the civil ones, no?"

The peddler flapped a dismissive hand. "That's the domain of the Buddhas. Our mountain deity doesn't do that."

"What does the mountain deity do?"

"Promotions and riches, good fortune in marriage, and you can even ask for children!" Grinning broadly, the peddler said, "Sir, how many wives and concubines do you have? How many children? Do you have both sons and daughters? If you're satisfied, pray on behalf of a friend! It's an easy favor, and guaranteed to work!"

Gu Yun turned to go.

“Hey, sir, wait just a minute! If you don’t want to pray for children, asking for riches also works! You’re sure to have excellent fortune in the coming year, basins overflowing with cash; you can even ask to be blessed with a good marriage! You’re elegant and handsome; with those peach-blossom eyes, you’re sure to be afflicted with trials in love your entire life…”

Gu Yun cursed him out with a laugh. “Oh, fuck off with that.”

He didn’t know whether he should laugh or cry. Once, while chatting with Shen Jiping on the front in Liangjiang, he’d boasted he was willing to protect home and country and become the most famous general of his generation. In a hundred years, he’d declared, he’d ascend to godhood on the worship of the common people, and he could live off their offerings, plying the trades of swindler, matchmaker, and Guanyin Bodhisattva.

He’d never imagined that before a hundred years had passed, the little hill where Chang Geng had once trained so diligently with his sword would beat him to the honor.

After leaving General’s Slope, Gu Yun released a wooden bird to alert Ge Pangxiao and his subordinates to his location, then found an inn to stay the night. Seeing the moon round as a silver dish overhead, he realized it was already the night of the Mid-Autumn Festival. Everyone had gone home to be with their family; no wonder the inn was so quiet.

It had been nearly twenty years since he’d picked up a young Chang Geng on the verge of death outside the walls of Yanhui. Like a flowing river, time had slipped past before he knew it.

Moved by this thought, Gu Yun leapt up to the roof and pulled out the white jade flute he always kept with him, then lifted it to his mouth and began to play. For once, he managed to hold a tune.

The melody was one Chang Geng had written him years ago in a sudden stroke of inspiration. Marshal Gu spent some three years learning this one tune, nearly tormenting Chang Geng to the point of ascension in the meantime—before the end, His Majesty had begun contemplating chopping off his own dragon’s claw, that hand that had made such trouble for himself, and the mere sight of the white jade flute had given him a migraine.

A long cry rang out overhead. Startled, Gu Yun looked up to see several Black Hawks wheeling toward the ground. “These brats sure showed up qu—”

Before he could say *quick*, the Black Hawk in the lead streaked toward him with a wild gust that left Gu Yun squinting into the wind. A hand grabbed him by the collar, the power of violet gold lifting his feet off the ground. Rows of storm lanterns around the inn puffed out in the gale stirred by the hawk’s wings.

Gu Yun still hadn’t gotten a good look at the person who had the audacity to manhandle him like this when he heard a furious growl at his ear. “Gu Zixi!”

He whipped his head back and caught sight of his dear emperor, whom he had last heard was out on an inspection tour. “Aren’t you—”

The group of Black Hawks shadowing Chang Geng touched down in quick succession, all of them dropping to one knee in a flurry of wings.

Chang Geng would never let Gu Yun tire himself, but thought nothing of putting himself to the same trouble. He'd embarked on the long-distance flight by Black Hawk to surprise Gu Yun, but hadn't even reached the Northwest Garrison when Ge Chen's message intercepted him and scared him out of his wits. His hands were shaking even now. After his initial snarl, he couldn't seem to get another word out.

Taking in his travel-worn state, Gu Yun guessed the gist of what had happened. *Oh shit*, he thought. He had angered the mountain deity with his ridicule, and the deity had sent swift retribution in the form of this man who was both his great love and great trial.

Gu Yun dismissed the Black Hawks with a wave and stepped forward to grab Chang Geng's elbow, leading him inside as he glibly continued where he'd left off: "Aren't you the goddess of the Moon Palace? Why have you snuck down here?"

Chang Geng shook his arm but failed to dislodge Gu Yun. He laughed in anger. "Don't you try that with me. Let go!"

With a clever shift of his weight, Gu Yun tugged Chang Geng toward him. "I won't. Since you've fallen into my arms on this world of mortal dust, you can forget about returning to the ranks of heaven."

Chang Geng glared at him. But when he looked into that face he hadn't seen in three months, half of his scowl evaporated on its own.

"I was thinking if they really perfected that wooden bird, I'd be able to make it back in time to see you for the Mid-Autumn Festival next year." Gu Yun threw everything he had into it, gazing imploringly into Chang Geng's eyes. "Don't blame Xiao-Ge, okay?"

Chang Geng never could maintain any anger or firmness with Gu Yun. At this concession, the fury on his face reduced by half again, and he seemed to struggle to remain stoic.

"Besides, I brought a set of hawk armor along with me, didn't I? I was never in any danger. How could I stand to make you worry?" Gu Yun's eyes curved in a smile as he played his trump card: he slid that oil-paper packet from his lapels, the fragrance of osmanthus flowers spilling out even through the wrapping. "Look what I have."

Chang Geng was silent.

Gu Yun grabbed his hand and pressed his advantage. "If not for this, you wouldn't have had the chance to come back to Yanhui and take a look around. Do you still remember this place?"

A complicated look crossed his face as Chang Geng carefully tucked the osmanthus cakes into his lapels. He said, peeved, "I do. I also remember how, despite being blind and deaf, you insisted on shoving yourself into the crowds at the market and nearly fell into the underground river…" Struck by a sudden realization, he turned to glare at Gu Yun. "Twenty years ago, I was always worried sick about you. How come it's just the same twenty years later? I haven't made any progress at all."

Gu Yun burst out laughing and dragged him outside. "As long as *I've* made some progress, it's okay—come on, I'll take you on a tour of the new Yanhui Town. There'll be no riffraff trying to get in on the fun today, just the two of us."

“Improving at flattery counts as progress? You…”

“Marquis—”

Chang Geng was still speaking when a mournful wail rose up over the wind. Ge Chen had found them.

Gu Yun grabbed Chang Geng’s arm and darted out the inn’s back door. “Speak of the devil—the riffraff have arrived. Let’s get out of here!”

Torn between laughter and tears, Chang Geng allowed himself to be dragged through a maze of back alleys.

After a series of twists and turns to lose the hapless Ge Chen, Gu Yun threw Chang Geng a mischievous smile. “I’ll take you on a tour through the town; we can walk north along the underground river. General’s Slope is the liveliest, and the underground river is open tonight. There are plenty of pleasure boats about; we could sail back to the inn after.”

Chang Geng looked at him with a half smile. “We could sail there, too.”

“Mm…wait, what?” Perplexed, Gu Yun heard the familiar notes of a guqin behind him. He whirled round to see a massive pleasure boat drifting down the middle of the underground river, carrying Shen Yi with his darling son upon his shoulders, nodding in time with Miss Chen’s guqin. He met Gu Yun’s eyes and saluted across the distance, showing all his teeth in a grin that was bright as day from the nighttime river ablaze with lanterns.

“Sir!” Several Black Hawks landed on Shen Yi’s boat, Old He in the lead with his voice like a gong. He raised the wooden bird Gu Yun had sent out in one hand, guffawing so hard his mouth looked apt to split at the corners. “I heard you fell out of the sky dicking around on a bird, ha ha ha!”

Shooting a glance at Gu Yun, Chang Geng couldn’t resist smiling at the rare sight of this man speechless with fury. Water roared in the underground river, and the dark silhouettes of trees rustled under silver moonlight. As he looked around, he discovered this small town where he’d grown up was almost unrecognizable. Their barbarian enemies had ceased their incursions, and their faraway expeditions were over.

The stiff autumn wind couldn’t scatter the clear light of the moon. Loved ones gathered round beneath the full moon, and the world was utterly new.

Extra:
First Meeting

SHEN YI REINED his horse to a halt and vaulted off, sprinting over to Gu Yun and panting out: "Zixi! Zixi!"

Raising a field scope, Gu Yun hummed but didn't turn, eyes never leaving the patrol of barbarian scouts making their silent departure. "A dozen big wagons stuffed full of violet gold, leaving tracks a palm's width deep. Right then. As expected of a commandant of the Eight Northern Commanderies, he has an impressive appetite—and such dauntless courage!"

It was the twenty-third year of Yuanhe. Gu Yun had recently received a secret edict to visit the northern border in search of the lost fourth prince, who had disappeared among the commoners. The fourth prince's birth mother was a northern barbarian woman, of the same origin as that poison that so grievously injured Gu Yun's eyes and ears in childhood. Not a single member of the Black Iron Battalion would have dared poke his sore spot like this, but his elderliness the emperor had no such qualms.

The Yuanhe Emperor's intentions were plain: The youngest prince had been lost for many years, and if he should be found, the sudden change in his circumstances would surely leave the child anxious and terrified. Asking Gu Yun to escort him was the emperor's way of encouraging Gu Yun to form a good relationship with this boy and bury past grudges.

If the old emperor wanted to shove him face-first into such a role, Gu Yun couldn't outright disobey. So he simply dawdled, sending people to perform a cursory search every now and again. If he hadn't discovered the barbarians' suspicious movements, he would still be sitting pretty in his original post, keeping watch over the Western Regions. The search for the unknown little princeling could never have galvanized him to set out himself.

"Jiping, you've come at just the right time." Gu Yun, who had yet to reach the age of twenty, let a mischievous smirk tug at the corner of his lips. He tossed the field scope to Shen Yi. "Head back tomorrow and transfer a troop of Black Hawks here."

Sweat dripped from Shen Yi's brow. "Never mind that. The little prince…"

Gu Yun was at the peak of his youthful arrogance, and a cluster of military leaders on the northern border who repeatedly resisted his orders had just allowed evidence of their wrongdoings to fall right into his hands. All his thoughts were on how to drag those imbeciles off their high horses, and he continued without really listening. "We needn't hurry to catch our two-faced commandant. Let's watch a little longer, let the barbarians bleed a bit more. I want to see how many vermin they'll flush out with their plot to corrode our gold. We can reel them all in at once, and confiscate all the violet gold they've smuggled in from the north."

Shen Yi jogged after him. "But the little prince…"

"Oh, we'll just say we haven't found him yet!" said Gu Yun, ready to lie through his teeth. "Let his golden branches and jade leaves grow wild a little longer. He's so big already, what's another year or two? There's no rush. Without him, what

excuse would I have to run off to the north so often? Those tongue-waggers in the Imperial Censorate are going on and on about the secret edict as it is."

At the end of his patience, Shen Yi resorted to insubordination and grabbed Gu Yun by the shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Gu Yun asked.

"The little prince is missing!" Shen Yi cried.

Gu Yun raised an eyebrow in exasperation. "Missing? Then send someone to find him. What are you still dithering about here for?"

"The Black Hawks are reporting the kid ran out beyond the pass on his own!"

Gu Yun clicked his tongue in frustration and looked back toward the horizon. Clouds gathered there, dark and oppressive, presaging another blizzard on the harsh northern border. He frowned. "What a pain in the neck. Heaven forbid he gets eaten by wolves."

Shen Yi was appropriately terrified of his prophetic crow's beak. "My dear commander, can't you be a little more optimistic?!"

"Come on then, let's go take a look."

The snow came thick and fast; within the blink of an eye, the land and sky were a blanket of white. The thickest fox-fur coats couldn't fend off the teeth of the bitter northern wind. Gu Yun blinked off the snow sticking to his eyelashes and took a sip of liquor for warmth, grumbling to himself, *This little whelp. Is he trying to get himself killed?*

"Sir." A Black Hawk, braving the snowstorm, had landed before them. "There's a pack of those barbarian-reared wolves two kilometers northwest. I approached under cover of the storm, but I couldn't get too close without alerting them."

"Wolves?" Shen Yi turned to Gu Yun in surprise. "Only barbarian nobles are allowed to raise wolves. The nobles stay as far from our borders as they can. Why would one of them bring a wolf pack here?"

"Huh. You know, I did hear a rumor," Gu Yun began, thoughtful. "The barbarian crown prince…the one called Jialai Yinghuo. They say he had some sort of affair with their goddess. Who knows if it's true."

"The fourth prince is the son of the goddess and His Majesty." Shen Yi blanched. "If Jialai Yinghuo knew the little highness left Huge'er's sight, do you think he would…"

"Aiyo." Gleefully speculating about the drama, Gu Yun sighed. "He must be green as a jade tsunami with envy."

"Sir!" Shen Yi yelled, "Have a whit of decency!"

"The wolves' masters can't be far. Black Hawks, you stay here; we don't want them to know we're here just yet. Jiping, you and I will go." Gu Yun dug his heels into his horse's sides and streaked off into the distance.

The storm raged around them, wind and snow buffeting their faces and choking their mouths and noses until their throats ached. Gu Yun and Shen Yi urged their horses on and soon heard the mournful howls of wolves on the wind.

Shen Yi shuddered. *That child—he's only eleven or twelve; if the wolves find him first…*

Would the boy survive? But he was a prince of the nation!

He cast a glance at Gu Yun, wrapped in a snow-white fox-fur coat and a white cloak. Even his horse was white. The slightest slip in focus and his commander with his swift, steady steed would melt right into the snowstorm. Shen Yi suddenly thought of how, eleven years ago, the attack on the Black Iron Battalion had sent the tender little playboy sprout in the Marquis Estate tumbling from his comfortable nest of brocade overnight. How could he possibly bear no grudge against a barbarian woman's child, prince or no? Perhaps he was only going through the motions of complying with imperial orders. Perhaps Gu Yun didn't care at all whether the little prince was alive or dead.

If the unlucky child had already perished under the jaws of those wolves, Gu Yun would simply need to come up with some excuse to present to the emperor. The emperor was old, and Great Liang's younger generation of hawks and wolves were eager to bare their black-iron-forged claws and fangs. They planned to unleash a bloody storm in the northwest. Even if imperial blood flowed in his veins, how long could a meager youth with no backing from his maternal family and no friends or relatives depend on the distant, dubitable traces of fatherly affection?

A shrill howl cut through the air. Shen Yi came back to himself with a shudder.

"Jiping!" Gu Yun called.

On the low rise before them, several large wolves with glossy, well-fed coats had appeared. The pack took a few slow steps toward their uninvited guests—the only warning they got before the beasts were lunging toward the men on their horses. Although Gu Yun and Shen Yi both wore civilian clothing, their steeds were battle-trained, unafraid of the snarling wolves. They reared up with a long whinny and charged. Shen Yi couldn't show his windslasher with barbarians so close; instead he grabbed a spare pair of iron stirrups and crashed them together. The screech of metal on metal echoed through the empty snowfields, and the wolves arched their backs in fright.

Shen Yi lowered his voice. "Zixi, do we kill them?"

"What do you mean, kill them?" Gu Yun hissed out of the corner of his mouth. "We're a pair of frail scholars passing by." Raising his voice again, he yelled, "Dage, don't be afraid! Get out that medicinal powder that repels beasts! You hang on here, I'll run for help!"

Shen Yi was lost for words. *Gu—Zixi—!*

How did this jackass pull off such a realistic performance of a pretty boy fleeing in the face of danger? It was like he had rehearsed it a thousand times!

The howling blizzard winds beyond the pass came from every direction. At present they were upwind of the wolves—an opportunity he couldn't miss. He set aside his spat with a certain Gu bastard and tossed a packet of medicine into the air, splitting it open with his horsewhip. The northern gale snatched up the pungent powder and flung it into the wolves' faces.

The creatures whimpered and shrank back. The barbarians hidden in the trees must have also realized they wouldn't succeed today with these two nuisances

around. A long whistle sounded over the wind, and the wolf pack slunk off with their tails between their legs, leaving behind a mess of churned-up snow—and a small, dark figure crumpled on the ground.

Shen Yi's heart seized. Before he could get a better look, Gu Yun urged his horse forward and shot past him with a whisper of wind.

"How is he?" Shen Yi asked.

"Breathing." Gu Yun stuck out an expectant hand. "Your flask."

Creeping closer, Shen Yi could see Gu Yun held a boy, eleven or twelve years of age and alarmingly thin. Bundled into Gu Yun's arms, he was a tiny thing, covered head to toe in blood. One small arm dangled limply, seemingly broken; his other hand was still clenched around the hilt of a knife.

Gu Yun carefully took the hand with the blade. The boy startled back to consciousness, staring straight into the young general's eyes. His pitch-dark eyes sparked like a pair of flint stones, unextinguished even on the verge of death.

Gu Yun flinched in surprise. "The flask!" he repeated.

Shen Yi tossed it over and Gu Yun caught it, pressing the lip to the boy's mouth. "Drink."

Who knew if the boy understood or simply responded to his commanding tone—when Gu Yun poured the liquor into his mouth, he didn't resist, obligingly swallowing a mouthful.

Shen Yi quickly inspected him for injuries. "Not too bad; he has some claw marks on his back and a bite on one leg, but neither are severe. The rest might be from falling as he was running… Why is there so much blood?"

"It's wolf blood," said Gu Yun.

"Huh?"

Gu Yun didn't elaborate, wrapping the boy in his cloak. "Let's go. We'll stop over in Yanhui Town."

As he finished speaking, he heard a soft sound. The boy had finally released his death grip on the blood-soaked knife, allowing it to slip to the ground. He shifted in Gu Yun's arms, then grabbed at his robes with a trembling hand.

"You trust me so much? But you don't even know me." Mysteriously moved, Gu Yun looked down at the strange child once again. *He's so light*, he thought.

He unconsciously softened his grip, as if afraid to crush the fragile flesh and bones he held cradled in his arms.

Many years later, as Uncle Wang sorted through old belongings in the Marquis Estate, he dug out a pair of fur-lined bracers from the bottom of one trunk or another. The craftsmanship was rude, the sort of thing a village hunter might wear—not something that belonged in the Marquis Estate. Afraid to throw anything away without confirmation, Uncle Wang caught Gu Yun on his day off to ask him.

"Oh, these." A smile spread over Gu Yun's face as soon as he saw the bracers. "They were a gift from a wild child who fought wolves with his teeth. That kid sure did a number on that wolf. He hacked up a perfectly good pelt until it looked like it'd been gnawed by a dog; this was all the usable material. It was just enough for a

pair of bracers—hey!”

Chang Geng, who had happened to pass by, recognized the maker of this pair of eyesores the moment he saw them. He reached out to snatch the bracers as Gu Yun swept them nimbly out of reach.

“Must you hoard every bit of trash?” Chang Geng asked. “Get rid of those things; I’ll bag a whole pelt during the autumn hunt and make you a better pair.”

“Perfect.” Gu Yun tucked the fur bracers into his lapels. “That one will be a gift from a big beauty, but this one’s a gift from a little beauty.”

Chang Geng had no retort.

“As I remember it, that little beauty was quite the shy one. He stuttered awfully when he gave me his gift.” Gu Yun lifted the reigning emperor’s chin with one shameless finger, affecting distaste. “Not like this one, who keeps trying to stick his nose into other people’s business. His skin must be thicker than that wolf’s.”

Chang Geng hissed and made a grab for his hand but caught only air. He threw himself at Gu Yun. “Not as thick as yours! Hand those over! I clearly intended to give them to Shen-xiansheng back then…”

“Give them to whom? Say that again.”

Uncle Wang retreated with a chuckle, not wanting to disrupt his masters’ fun.

“Your Majesty, you were clinging onto that little blade for dear life. Why did you drop it as soon as you opened your eyes and saw me?”

“Perhaps because you were slightly more handsome than the wolves.”

“Are you looking for a beating?”

“A lot more handsome—a lot, okay?”

Or perhaps…

My dear general, the connections between some people are written in the stars. After the first glance, the rest is inescapable.

A NOTE ON THE YUANHE EMPEROR

THE YUANHE EMPEROR was a contradictory sort of person, especially in his later years. He was narrow-minded, cowardly, and sentimental.

Gu Yun grew up at his side. As a child, he was both deaf and blind, and very pitiful. Emperor Wu’s blood flowed in the little marquis’s veins, and he was the legitimate heir to the Black Iron Battalion. For reasons both logical and emotional—for the sake of both family and nation—the Yuanhe Emperor had to treat him well. Even if he lied to himself and everyone else as he did it, the people of the nation expected this much.

At first, the Yuanhe Emperor only intended to go through the motions. But the pitiable old man wasn’t born with a heart of steel. He had always been easy to sway. He spent the latter half of his life regretting what he’d done, and as time went on, his act became real. Although Gu Yun and the old emperor were technically of the same generation, the Yuanhe Emperor raised him like a son, and a most favored son at that. Li Feng and Prince Wei added together didn’t receive as much attention

from their father as the solitary Gu Yun.

The old emperor's unspeakable wariness was a dark cloud hanging ever over Gu Yun's head, while the old emperor's blatant favoritism laid the foundation for Gu Yun's arrogance.

Thus Gu Yun spent his adolescence trying to balance on these two thin wires. He wasn't afraid to show open defiance, to mouth the words of obedience while transgressing in secret, or to neglect imperial orders. He overstepped the bounds of etiquette as a subject on numerous occasions, got into trouble and left it to the old emperor to smooth over, and even allowed the little princes to call him their imperial uncle—and in one case, godfather—without proper authorization. (As for the last, Shen Yi was nearly scared to tears when Gu Yun encouraged it. Never could he have imagined that in order to protect his fourth and youngest son, whose position within the line of succession was awkward, the Yuanhe Emperor would not only fail to fault Gu Yun for it, he would even make the title official).

At the same time, Gu Yun never truly crossed the line. He would carve himself open and smear his guts across the Imperial City's nine gates, but played deaf and mute in court. He stood entirely alone, and aside from those of the down-on-his-luck noble Shen Yi, acknowledged no overtures from any other family, noble or notable, in the capital. Even knowing Li Feng differed from him in politics, he still acceded to the Yuanhe Emperor's wishes and rushed back to the capital like a timely fall of rain to check Prince Wei when it came time for the Longan Emperor to ascend the throne.

After Li Feng became the emperor, Gu Yun set aside his old ways.

For one thing, he shared little personal connection with Li Feng; the two were purely lord and subject. For another, he had matured in the intervening years, and understood there was no mortal flesh beneath the Black Iron Tiger Tally or the imperial jade seal that served as the key to Great Liang. The highest ruler of the land and the marshal of the three divisions were both inhuman in the eyes of the nation. He found his own way, and understood what kind of fate he was destined for.

At that point, the man who had both feared and cherished him was gone. Beyond the palace walls, between the gas lamps…the painful love and hate Gu Yun had attributed to this place were long extinguished.

Extra:
Truth or Dare, Steampunk Edition

IN THE YEAR after Li Min ascended the throne, on the evening of the sixteenth of the first month, the hot spring courtyard in the northern imperial villa was lit bright as day.

All the off-duty soldiers of the Northern Camp had come over. General Shen, in the capital for his annual report on his duties, had arranged to stay a few extra days, and even the ever-hardworking emperor found an excuse to cancel court for the occasion. With His Majesty personally presiding over the gathering, the pesky sycophants hoping to use presenting birthday wishes as an excuse to suck up to the marquis didn't dare show their faces. Everyone in the northern hot springs villa were their own people, and the atmosphere was merry and familiar.

After the birthday feast concluded, the Northern Camp soldiers returned to the garrison, unable to leave their posts too long. The bustling courtyard gradually quieted. Hoping to liven things up again, Cao Chunhua suggested a game of flower-passing: a bright little ball was to be passed around the circle while someone beat the drum. Whoever held it when the drumming stopped had to perform a task of the group's choosing.

"Are we composing poems?" Ge Chen paled and waved his hands. "I'm not doing it, I can't; I can beat the drum for you all."

"In that case, I'll have to be the flower," Gu Yun replied.

“Are you getting past your prime, sir?” Shen Yi scoffed. “The Imperial Tutor personally taught you as a youth, and the sycophants all sing your praises as a learned general. Even your drunken scribbles are sold for thousands of taels…”

Gu Yun slapped the table in rage. “What bastard sold them? And how come I never saw a single coin?”

Seeing that Marshal Gu was about to hang up his general’s seal and refuse his salary to go home and scrawl a mountain of calligraphy, Master Fenghan hurried to smooth things over: “Composing poems over wine is an elegant pastime, but like the ritual songs of immortals, it may not be the most pleasant diversion. We needn’t be so reserved. Instead of a poem, why not a song? Now that would be lively…”

Gu Yun laughed. “Master Fenghan, now there’s an idea! I—”

Hearing that Marshal Gu wanted to sing, everyone jolted in shock, heads aching as if they’d all taken a parhelion arrow to the temple. Chang Geng swiftly plucked up a piece of crispy fried meat and stuffed it into Gu Yun’s mouth. “Talk less and eat more, you haven’t fully healed from your injuries! I told you to recover your strength; have you forgotten your doctor’s orders?”

“That’s right.” Miss Chen chimed in with her solemn agreement. “Marshal, your lungs are injured, you mustn’t strain them.”

Shen Yi did his part as well. Adopting an obsequious tone, he said, “It…it’s really not necessary, sir. We all know you’re capable, in the prime of life—you must make sure to rest.”

Ge Chen shuddered. “I may need a change of pants.”

With this musical murder weapon in attendance, they couldn’t sing either. After a round of discussion, the half-drunk pillars of the nation, representing civil and military posts alike, settled on an unrefined game—they dug a hole large enough to squeeze a hand inside their bright little ball, and whoever held it when the drum stopped had to pull an embroidered pouch from inside. They could either answer the question written in the pouch or drink three cups of wine in punishment.

Upon hearing the rules, Chang Geng placed a hand over Gu Yun’s cup. “He can’t drink.”

Marshal Gu, who had just sat up attentively, flopped back into his seat. He drawled, “Edict received, Your Majesty. In that case, I’ll be spilling everything.”

The emperor thought it over, then summoned a palace attendant and whispered a few words. The attendant jogged off, then returned a moment later with a little jug and a porcelain plate. The top came off the jug, and everyone craned their necks forward only to be slapped in the face with a rich, sour fragrance.

“You can’t drink wine, but you can have a few sips of vinegar.” Chang Geng smiled. “They’re both made from grain, after all.”

Gu Yun was speechless. He and that twerp Shen Yi were both made from flesh. Did that make them the same?!

He didn’t like sweet things, but he hated sour ones. A single whiff of vinegar at the dinner table would send him into tantrums as a child. Later on, after the old marquis had beaten him into submission, he stopped throwing tantrums, but could still barely force himself to swallow. When he saw the leafy vegetables piled on the porcelain plate and doused in vinegar, Gu Yun’s face drained of color. “Where did you get xiangchun in the middle of winter?”

“The palace had it in the icehouse. It symbolizes eternal spring. How could I let you drink plain vinegar? Of course I had to request some side dishes to accompany it.” The emperor picked some up with a smile. “Let me try it for you; I’ll see if it’s fresh.”

Gu Yun leapt a meter out of range, no longer so eager to soak in his dear emperor’s fragrance.

In the first round, the bright ball stopped in Cao Chunhua’s hands. He thumped his chest and took his time dramatically digging around inside before pulling out the embroidered pouch. But before he could read the slip of paper tucked inside, Ge Chen reached over and snatched it from his hands. “Let me see, it says… ‘What is the one thing you can’t give up in this life?’”

Cao Chunhua turned to salute Chang Geng and declared, “Loyalty!”

His Majesty smiled. “Save it, you liar. Drink.”

Ge Chen tried to pour a cup down his throat, but Cao Chunhua ducked and ran. “No, no, no, wait—I’ll go again! I’ll go again! Beauty, it’s beauty!”

“Dishonest,” declared the emperor with all the force of imperial might. “Punish him.”

The beautiful Cao Chunhua, flattened by this imperial edict, could do nothing but open his mouth and let Ge Chen pour three cups down his throat.

Gu Yun had been bedridden since his return from the battlefield in Liangjiang, and had only recently been allowed to leave the house. Forget wine; he hadn’t even tasted dregs. He was practically green with envy. But what good was envy—all he had was a jar of xiangchun drowned in vinegar, giving off a pungent scent that reminded him of dead insects.

Perhaps his dread of these insects moved the heavens, for the little ball ended up in his hands in the second round. But Marshal Gu had never been one to go down without a fight. To avoid having vinegar-soaked xiangchun stuffed down his throat, the instant the palace attendant struck the final beat on the drum, he covertly flicked his fingers, hitting the attendant right on the elbow. The man’s arm went numb and slumped forward, striking the drum one more time—Gu Yun seized his opportunity to stuff the ball into Shen Yi’s hands.

Shen Yi was speechless. Why did he sit next to Gu Zixi?

The embroidered pouch General Shen fished out was another quite fitting for the occasion. It read, *Have you ever been beaten in punishment? What was the reason for your most recent beating?*

Shen Yi pointed at Gu Yun. “I have; because of him.”

Gu Yun propped his chin on one hand, chuckling from the sidelines as if it was some sort of honor.

“Was it because you fed laxatives to your tutor?” Chang Geng asked.

Shen Yi stared at Gu Yun in shock, trying to say with his eyes, *You go around spilling every little embarrassing incident to each other now? Aren’t you ashamed?*

“Oh, that was ages ago,” Gu Yun said. “Shen Jiping here has had guts the size of a pea since we were kids. If I didn’t show him how to have fun, he’d have studied himself stupid long ago.”

Shen Yi scoffed. “Thanks to your influence, I was lucky my dad didn’t beat me stupid.”

Everyone urged him to tell the story.

“It’s been over a decade now.” Shen Yi considered. “It was before the first rebellion in the Western Regions. I must have been sixteen or seventeen.”

At sixteen, Chang Geng and his companions had been traveling the nation with the Linyuan Pavilion. Everyone leaned forward at the revelation that the cool-headed and mature General Shen was still at home taking beatings for misbehavior at that age.

“The Yuanhe Emperor arranged an engagement between this guy and Grand Secretary Guo’s daughter.” Seizing his chance to strike back at Gu Yun, Shen Yi said, “Now there was a girl as beautiful as a flower. Radiant on the outside and pure on the inside, she lived up to her reputation as one of the Twin Beauties of the capital…the other being the crown prince’s consort at the time, our empress dowager of today, of course—”

Gu Yun was quick to interrupt him. “Cut the nonsense, talking as if you’d actually met her. *I* never even met her.”

Under the cover of pouring more tea, Gu Yun snuck a glance at the emperor. Chang Geng was sitting beneath a lantern, its glow casting a gentle light over his features. Seeming to sense his gaze, Chang Geng tapped Gu Yun’s thigh out of sight beneath the table, then took another piece of xiangchun from the plate in front of him with a fake smile.

Gu Yun shuddered.

“I heard the stories. Miss Guo had no shortage of admirers, after all,” Shen Yi said. “Some of them, when they heard about the engagement, thought it unfair. They all accused him of being a heartless playboy—of course, the ones slandering him were playboys themselves, or they wouldn’t have had time for such nonsense. The ringleader was the Left Minister’s son. This lad billed himself as the preeminent gentleman-scholar of the capital—though where this so-called ‘scholar’ had received his credentials, no one knew. What they did know was that he loved to flirt with women in his spare time.

“One day, this guy went to Fragrant Cloud Pavilion to see his lover. Well he had just taken his pants off when his private room in the pavilion caught fire. In his panic, the minister’s son didn’t even manage to find his belt—he darted outside holding up his pants as smoke billowed at his back. Everyone started calling him ‘Young Master Flying Cloud’ after that. The Left Minister was so ashamed he retired at the end of that year.”

Miss Chen was still puzzled. Turning to her fiancé, she asked, “But why did *you* get beaten?”

Gu Yun cackled. “Because this idiot refused to listen to me. I told him to walk right out the front door after setting the fire. *He* insisted on jumping out the window and going through the rear courtyard, where he ran right into Old Master Shen, who was there meeting friends.” Gu Yun could hardly speak he was laughing so hard. “He tried to be so sneaky—he even wore a disguise—but he couldn’t fool his own dad.”

Fragrant Cloud Pavilion had been just behind Kite's Flight Pavilion. It was a high-class establishment where plenty of scholars liked to gather, and the food they served was exceptional. But no matter how highbrow it was, it was still a pleasure house. His dad hadn't been doing anything illicit, but being caught by his own son meeting friends in an entertainment house was enough to make him fly into a rage in embarrassment—to say nothing of how his son had gotten up to an entirely fresh kind of mischief.

A wicked plot like setting fire to someone's room was clearly Gu Yun's idea, but Old Master Shen couldn't beat the Marquis of Anding. He vented all his temper on his own son and beat Shen Yi until he howled; afterward, Shen Yi was bedridden for over a month.

Shen Yi hurled the colored ball at Gu Yun in fury. "You take a penalty too."

Gu Yun was mystified. "Why?"

"Because you planned that entire farce. Come to think of it, sir, you really have been strategizing from behind the scenes since you were a boy. I remember you had the layout of Fragrant Cloud Pavilion completely…"

"I'll do it, I'll do it, I owe you one, Jiping-xiong, please close that cursed mouth of yours." Gu Yun gamely picked up a piece of xiangchun beneath the emperor's watchful eyes and swallowed it like he was committing suicide by swallowing gold.

As the third round began, Gu Yun was still trying to choke down that piece of xiangchun. He held his breath and passed the ball to Shen Yi before reaching for his cup of tea. But at the next beat of the drum, Shen Yi, who should have passed the ball on to Miss Chen, smashed it back into Gu Yun's hands, lightning-quick.

Gu Yun nearly dumped his tea down the front of his robes. He looked up in puzzlement.

With a final *dong*, the drum fell silent.

Shen Yi burst out in laughter.

Gu Yun couldn't get into a slap fight with Shen Yi at the table in front of all their friends, so he was left to magnanimously wave a hand. "There's nothing I can't confess. What's there to be afraid of? I'll just…"

His boasting ground to a halt when he saw the slip of paper inside the embroidered pouch. It read: *At the lowest point in your life, what was your greatest comfort?*

Upon seeing the marshal had lost his voice, everyone became terribly curious. Shen Yi leaned over. "What does it say?"

Gu Yun tucked the paper strip away and slanted a look at Chang Geng. His gaze went distant for a moment, thinking of who knows what, before he suddenly began to laugh.

Perplexed, Chang Geng blinked back at him. "What does it say?"

The young emperor's gaze was crystal clear, as if all the lantern light in the northern villa was contained within his eyes.

It was you, silly, Gu Yun thought. *Whatever. Might as well go for broke*.

Picking up his chopsticks, he ate every last one of those symbols of eternal spring on the plate in front of him, bite by bite.

Oh, how lackluster a taste. And here was hoping his suffering would attract some good fortune.

Extra:
A Secret Tale from the Northern Border

IN THE LAST CHAPTER, we reached the part of our story where General Shen got his revenge. He finally pulled one over on the marshal while he was overcome by vinegar fumes, forcing him to take that colorful little ball and read that particular slip of paper.

Had it only asked about sources of comfort, well, Gu Yun had many of those. A beauty named Chang Geng was the first, but aside from him, there was good food, good fun, his brothers-in-arms, the sullen-faced Shen Yi, the tender flowers planted by Uncle Wang, the precious horses fed and brushed by Old Huo… There were many things in the world that made him pause in his steps in admiration or coaxed a smile from his lips. He had affection for all of them, and all were comforts to him.

But when had he considered himself to be at the lowest point in his life?

The first thing that popped into Gu Yun's mind when he saw that line of script wasn't when he was newly orphaned, deaf, and blind. That memory was much too old, and his condition had persisted for decades afterward; he was used to it. Looking back on it now, it was the time before then, the years of his youth spent terrorizing the Marquis Estate, that were blurry in his recollection. When he occasionally recalled some fragment, or when Uncle Wang and the others discussed old tales, he felt a distance from them, as though they were things that had happened to someone else.

Nor did he think of the Far Western siege of the capital. By then, he had matured and become strong; he understood everything he should have understood, and had contemplated everything he should have contemplated. No one dared append *little* when they called him *marquis* anymore, and when they spoke of the Black Iron Battalion, they thought first of Gu Yun and second of the late marquis, Gu Shen. He was the final barrier between his people and the loss of home and country, and he had no pity to spare for himself.

If pressed to choose, the time in his life that brought to mind such phrases as "the lowest point" or "having nowhere to turn" was when the Longan Emperor ascended the throne and ordered Gu Yun to escort the northern barbarian heir Jialai Yinghuo out beyond the pass.

Spring had come late that year. It was the third month when he set out, but there wasn't a breath of life on the northern border, as if the heavens and earth had frozen solid, resigned never to see the sun again. Wolf packs buried the carcasses of sheep and cattle in deep pits in the snow, and after a walk through the bracing gale, a man could choke on the stink of iron from the cuts lashed into his mouth and nose by the stinging winds.

Clad in light-pelt armor, Shen Yi leapt down from his mount before his horse had fully come to a halt. He charged toward the commander's tent, the sound of muffled coughs reaching his ears even before he lifted the curtain. Shen Yi's hand shook with fright.

The commander of the Northern Border Garrison was standing guard before the commander's tent. "It's not the marshal," he hurried to say. "That's Young Master Chen."

"Doctor Chen?"

"Yes, sir. They say he's in poor health; he usually never goes out in winter. He made an exception and rushed here this time, but ran into a snowstorm as soon as he left the pass. Traveling in weather like that wouldn't do even a healthy person any good, much less Young Master Chen. The doctor came here to treat a patient only to end up one himself." The man sighed.

Shen Yi had been riding through the snow all day and was still cloaked in its heavy chill. Afraid to make things worse by charging in, he drew his hand back from the tent flap. Traces of anxiety marred his usually handsome and composed visage, and his cheeks had sunken within the space of a few days. As if sensing its rider's unease, his horse stamped restlessly in place as Shen Yi handed his reins to another guard.

"His Majesty instructed us to return to the west after we took the barbarian heir back to his homeland," Shen Yi confided, lowering his voice. "We should have set off ages ago! The governor's office on the road to the Northwest Garrison sent messengers asking after us several times already. The three divisions of the Black Iron Battalion are waiting there. It would be understandable if we were late by a week or two, but it's been nearly a month!"

"Is the marshal still…" the commander trailed off.

Shen Yi shook his head, his face grave.

"What happened?" The commander was perplexed. "The marshal practically grew up in the northwest. Maybe he's less used to it after returning to the capital, but there's no reason he should find the winds beyond the northern pass so intolerable. Wasn't he perfectly fine when he arrived? You don't think it could be barbarian interference, do you?"

"It's not." Shen Yi was unwilling to elaborate. A dark shadow slid across his face, and he waved the man off. "Leave it be."

A young man walked out from the tent, swaying as the northern gales knocked him off balance. After recovering his footing, he managed to get some words out: "General Shen, you've arrived. The young master invites you inside; he's ready to begin acupuncture."

Shen Yi hemmed and hawed, then huffed out a sigh and went in.

The second young master of the Taiyuan Prefecture Chen family was a miracle doctor with gifted hands, but was unable to cure himself. He was naturally frail and sickly, and had stayed sequestered in his home for years; any time he left the house, he could expect to fall gravely ill. Rushing across the nation to the bitterly cold lands beyond the pass was as good as sacrificing his own life for his patient's. Given how hard he was coughing, the decent thing would have been to insist he take a few days of rest. But despite rolling the words, *Young Master Chen, please take care of yourself* around on his tongue, in the end, Shen Yi said nothing.

There was truly no one else.

The braziers were blazing inside the commander's tent, but the warmth that hit Shen Yi's face seemed to carry the iron tang of blood.

“Extinguish a few of those braziers.” Young Master Chen’s voice carried from deeper in the tent. He had covered his face with a layer of gauze to prevent his coughing from disturbing the patient, and his voice came out muffled. “Aren’t you afraid you’ll bake him? Since when was your marshal so afraid of the cold?”

His hands shook when he coughed, so he didn’t apply the needles himself. He carefully instructed his apprentice from the side, much more nervous than if he’d been personally doing the work. He didn’t dare lose focus for a second, and beads of sweat soon stood out on his forehead.

Shen Yi was afraid to interrupt them. He hovered in the doorway across the room for nearly an hour before Young Master Chen straightened in his seat. “It’s done.”

Gu Yun appeared semi-conscious as the doctor’s apprentice helped him to a seated position. Shen Yi had started over when Gu Yun batted the apprentice’s hand away, then leaned over the edge of the bed and puked up a mouthful of blood.

“Zixi!” Shen Yi yelped in fear.

Unable to sit up without help, Gu Yun slumped over.

Young Master Chen’s hand flew over the paper as he scribbled down a prescription. “Don’t worry, I’ll give him a pick-me-up.”

Shen Yi went silent.

“Second Young Master Chen, is that you?” Gu Yun asked, hoarse.

The doctor started in surprise. “You didn’t give him the medicine for his eyes and ears the past few days, did you?” he asked Shen Yi.

Shen Yi shook his head. He felt Gu Yun’s forehead—it was sheened in cold sweat, but his fever had broken.

Young Master Chen considered, then sniffed the hem of his sleeve. He smiled. “He’s got a dog’s nose.”

The world was a blur to Gu Yun; he strained to recognize Shen Yi before muttering weakly, “What did you summon him out here for? All this trouble… I’m not going to die.”

“Sir.” Shen Yi forced a bitter laugh. “We cooked this morning’s porridge on your body. If your fever kept climbing, you might’ve become Great Liang’s first human-shaped violet gold field.”

Gu Yun couldn’t hear well to begin with, and now his ears were ringing from the fever. He caught no more than a few words—not that he particularly cared what Shen Yi had to say. His head dropped down and he closed his eyes; it was impossible to tell if he had fainted again or was merely resting.

“General Shen, why is it that you look so mournful every time I see you?” Young Master Chen shook out the finished prescription and coughed again until his eyes flushed red at the corners. When he spoke again, however, there was a smile in his voice. This young man was always jovial—in his own words, those like him, who were destined for an early death, were unfortunate enough. If they couldn’t at least look on the bright side, wouldn’t that be heaping misery upon misery?

When Shen Yi heard his question, he thought to himself, *Well that’s just ridiculous. Most people look for a doctor because they’re sick—are they supposed to light a string of firecrackers to celebrate the occasion?*

But he wasn't close with Young Master Chen, so it wouldn't do to be too blunt. He bowed his head and said, "Chen-xiong, thank you for making the journey."

"It's no trouble at all. Marshal Gu once saved my younger sister's life, and I'm rather fond of him. Once he recovers, just have him send me a fan with some of his calligraphy on it."

"Then, his illness—"

"General Shen ought to know the cause." Young Master Chen smiled at him. "He's young and has a soldier's constitution. As long as he can keep some food down these next three days, he'll be all right. Don't worry."

What, then, was the cause of Gu Yun's illness?

Before the turn of the year, he had hastened to the late Yuanhe Emperor's sickbed with the fourth prince in tow and managed to see the old emperor one last time. He had said to the dying man, "After Your Majesty passes, I will no longer have any family left in the world."

Only now did he discover he had lost anything he could call a family long before then.

Gu Yun was a model patient; three military divisions were waiting on him, and he couldn't afford to be temperamental. He drank any medicine he was given and ate all his meals. After he woke, his personal guard, following the doctor's orders, made him up a bowl of thoroughly overcooked meat porridge. Gu Yun drained every drop without a word of complaint.

When Shen Yi heard, he sighed in relief. The word of a member of the Taiyuan Prefecture Chen family could indeed be relied upon. But in the middle of the night, the fever that had broken roared back with a fury, and Gu Yun threw up everything he had eaten.

When Shen Yi charged into Young Master Chen's tent in the middle of the night, he was surprised to find the white-clothed young man fully dressed, as if expecting his arrival. Young Master Chen looked placidly back at him. "I didn't say he would recover if he ate; I said he would recover if he managed to keep food down… Let's go. I'll perform acupuncture on him again. *Tsk*, we're treating the symptoms but not the cause."

Shen Yi led the way to the commander's tent, blocking the wind for Young Master Chen. He turned and asked quietly, "After three days…"

Young Master Chen paused in his step and sighed, a white plume in the chilly air. "Then…General, you shall have to forgive my lack of knowledge and meager talents."

Shen Yi's heart sank.

Three days passed rapidly. Despite being a cooperative patient, Gu Yun showed no improvement. He lost weight like his vitality was being bled away, and worst of all, nothing anyone said could get through to him—he was deaf and walled off from the world, unable to hear a word.

On the third evening, when his red-eyed personal guard brought his meal, Gu Yun turned his head away and refused to eat.

The guard was on the verge of tears. He stared at Shen Yi, who had followed him into the tent, unsure what to do. Gu Yun tilted his chin and smiled at the young guard, shaking his head—*Your soup noodles smell pretty good, but eating and throwing up over and over again is too much for my poor throat. I really can't swallow any more.*

"It's all right; you can head out first." Shen Yi took the bowl, covered it, and placed it on a little furnace to keep warm, waving the guard out. He pulled a glass monocle from his lapels and set it on the bridge of Gu Yun's nose.

The icy metal of the frame shocked Gu Yun a little further into wakefulness. He took a long moment to gather his strength and signed to Shen Yi: "What is it?"

Shen Yi stood in place, a complicated look on his face, before screwing up his resolve and pulling out a letter. "It's…it's a reply from the capital. You…"

The two of them had lied up and down to Chang Geng, then snuck out of the Marquis Estate like thieves. Gu Yun had nearly pulled out his hair fretting along the way but never figured out how to placate him. In the end, he'd bullied Shen Yi into ghostwriting a personal letter for him, which he made a copy of in his own hand and sent back home.

Now, Chang Geng had replied.

This child of the Yuanhe Emperor and a barbarian woman had vanished among civilians and grown up in Yanhui Town. Now Gu Yun knew the truth of the woman's flight: thirty barbarian suicide fighters had attacked the Black Iron Battalion, and Chang Geng's mother had served as his father's scapegoat.

Gu Yun stared, stony-faced, at Shen Yi through the glass monocle. "…Get out."

Shen Yi pressed his lips into a tight line. He placed the canister with the letter at the head of Gu Yun's bed and turned toward the doorway. After a few steps, he couldn't resist looking back again. "Zixi, you…"

His answer was a crisp clatter—Gu Yun had swept the mail canister to the ground.

Worried he'd made the wrong move, Shen Yi raced off to find Doctor Chen and ask him for other ideas. The command tent was left still and silent, without even the breath of a breeze.

Gu Yun sagged against the head of the bed. Illness had hollowed him out. He felt as if he had plunged into a steep ravine, and the first twenty years of his life were all on the other side. He had lived every one of those days, yet when he looked back, they seemed suddenly far beyond his reach.

He couldn't resist glancing at the canister on the ground. As little as half a month ago, he had been eagerly awaiting this reply. He'd thought how his little Chang Geng had so happily celebrated his birthday with him before Gu Yun left without a goodbye, about how the kid always had so much on his mind, and would surely be terribly hurt…

Veins bulged on Gu Yun's hand, so thin it was only a layer of skin over bone.

Shiliu, it's time to take your medicine.

...Stop messing around. You'll burn yourself on the congee.

Yifu, you're the person who treats me the best in this world.

I'm not going. I have to train! If I don't get some real skills, who will take care of you in the future?

Yifu, eat your noodles, then come inside.

Right—that bowl of noodles. It was overcooked and soggy and had bits of eggshell floating in the broth, about the same as the bowl Shen Yi had just put over the fire.

The furnace warmed the underside of the bowl, the savory scent of soup seeping through the gap between bowl and lid. It was just like the one that had greeted him the day of the sixteenth amid the desolate chill of the ice-bound capital.

Gu Yun's chest heaved. He struggled to his feet, but his knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground. Snatching a windslasher stashed inside the bed curtains, he repurposed it as a walking stick to push himself upright and picked up the letter canister from where it had rolled away across the floor. He opened it slowly, with weak, shaking hands.

"To my respected godfather: Since our parting, I have had no family in all the capital. Pieces of armor serve as my sole companions, a meager comfort…"

I have nothing at all, only a pair of your pauldrons.

The plum blossoms in the Marquis Estate are at the end of their season. I hope you saw the flowers as you departed, or their efforts will have gone to waste, another year spent on fruitless endeavors. Even if they bloom again next year, the blossoms won't be the same.

There are many military affairs to see to in the northwest—is it unbecoming of me to disturb you so often with my letters? You must be very busy, and not missing me at all…but it's not the same for me.

The capital city is too lonely. Aside from you, I have no one else to miss.

Gu Yun could barely hold onto the letter. The windslasher fell to the floor, the crash of metal echoing beyond the walls of the tent. His personal guards rushed in at once in a terrible fright.

That night, Gu Yun endured the pain and swallowed half a bowl of soup noodles mixed with the taste of blood. He didn't throw up again.

Extra: The Man Behind the Capital's New Fashions

IN THE TENTH YEAR of Longan, the new emperor personally appeared on the battlefield in Liangjiang before officially ascending the throne. Dongying switched sides at the very last moment, and Great Liang declared total victory in Jiangnan. The rest of the war was a foregone conclusion. Despite the Far Western pope's exceptional talent as a tactician, even he couldn't change the inevitable.

Finally Gu Yun could hang up his marshal's seal.

When Gu Yun was still in the garrison at Liangjiang, he'd felt he was perfectly well. He hadn't broken any arms or legs, nor had he scarred his precious face. He was as handsome and elegant as ever. Perhaps he was encased in steel plates, but he had maintained a long friendship with these steel companions, and they were close as brothers. After defeating the Far Westerners, he fancied the only thing standing between him and riding triumphantly back onto the battlefield was a good night's sleep.

After handing all his various responsibilities to Shen Yi, Gu Yun finally laid down his mental armor and let himself sleep like the dead in the commander's tent. After so many years spent sleeping with a weapon beneath his pillow, it was the best night of rest he'd had in ages. He slept so deeply he didn't even dream.

He returned to wakefulness in a half-conscious haze, rousing to the faint sound of voices and the weight of a hand laid gently on his face. That person's fingers were cold, and their sleeves carried the familiar scent of pacifying fragrance.

Chang Geng. At the thought, the cord drawing up his consciousness slackened, and he sank again into slumber.

"It's been three days." Chang Geng looked up, his face pale. He was more exhausted now than he had been after winging his way to the battlefield in Liangjiang without sleep or rest, and his lips had begun to chap and crack. "Why is he still not waking up?" he asked Miss Chen, keeping his voice low.

Chen Qingxu handed him a bowl of water. Chang Geng accepted it, but only took a single sip to check the temperature before carefully tipping it into Gu Yun's mouth with a little spoon.

"The marshal's medicine contains sedatives, but it's not all the medication. He's pushed himself too hard these last years. The moment he let himself relax, it hit him all at once," Miss Chen said. "There's also your pacifying fragrance, Your Majesty—"

Chang Geng was never without his pacifying fragrance; he practically marinated in the scent. Alarmed, he untied the sachet of powder and tossed it aside. "You think it's the pacifying fragrance? That's right, I wanted to ask. He seems particularly sensitive to Miss Chen's formula, and sleeps deeply if I light even a little. But it's a mild drug; it shouldn't have any adverse interactions. Or is it because…"

His health really is that poor?

"Your Majesty," Chen Qingxu said, "sleeping deeply isn't a bad thing."

"I know, but…"

"Actually, people like the marquis, who have grown up soaked in medicine since youth, have a higher tolerance. I heard that during the assassination attempt at the hot spring villa in the northern outskirts, the perpetrators used enough sedatives to bring down several strong men, yet the marquis merely experienced some momentary weakness in his limbs," Chen Qingxu explained patiently. "Your Majesty, if he's unaffected by such a strong drug, what's a packet of pacifying fragrance? The reason he sleeps so deeply is more likely…"

More likely what? Chang Geng looked at her, perplexed.

Chen Qingxu may have belonged to the jianghu in many ways, but she was still a young and unmarried woman. It seemed improper to say more than this. She gave him an awkward smile and left after dropping a shallow curtsy.

Chang Geng couldn't understand what had embarrassed her so. Mystified, he looked down and continued to spoon water into Gu Yun's slack mouth. A thought crossed his mind, and his hand paused—

If it wasn't the medicinal qualities that made Gu Yun sleep so deeply…was it the scent?

Because the one associated with the scent is…me?

Chang Geng sat frozen for a long time, then carefully set down the bowl of water. He felt there was a tiny pond within his heart, shuddering with an unending series of ripples. He took Gu Yun's hand and gently rubbed at its calluses, then sighed and laced their fingers together…

When Gu Yun awoke again it was to a great jostling, followed closely by a rumble like the sigh of an enormous beast.

The muffled roar shocked even the half-deaf Gu Yun from his sleep. His mind hadn't yet left the battlefield, and alarm slammed into him before he was fully awake. Gu Yun's eyes flew open.

He was immediately blinded by a bright white light. Instinctively tugging Chang Geng tighter into his arms, he reached for the windslasher at the head of his bed. His hand met empty air.

Where was his windslasher?

Where was his armor?

Even without his glass monocle, Gu Yun knew this wasn't his commander's tent in the Liangjiang Garrison—the scent of cold iron and sweat from the soldiers coming in and out of the tent was gone, and there was an incense burner releasing a quiet, sedate fragrance at the head of the bed. The mattress beneath him was soft enough to melt his bones, and outside the window…

A field of white.

Since when did it snow in Jiangnan in the third month? Or did he become even blinder than he'd thought?

The man he was protecting in his arms pulled his face closer and pressed a kiss to the corner of his eye, then placed his glass monocle on the bridge of his nose.

Gu Yun's vision cleared. He heard a long whine, and their room shuddered one last time. White steam billowed outside the window like a sea of clouds, surging thickly before slowly scattering to reveal the scenery of the north, yet to come alive in the early spring. Rows of iron puppets and guards flanked the platform, led by the captain of the Imperial Guard.

"We've reached the capital, Zixi. We're home."

Gu Yun's last memory was of drifting off in the commander's tent in the Liangjiang Garrison. He had merely closed and opened his eyes, and found himself in the capital city.

Face blank, he revealed the most confounded expression he'd ever worn in his life. "…Ah?"

Half a month later, the steam railway connecting the north and south officially commenced operation.

The history books had it that the earliest steam locomotives burned violet gold and were strictly for military use. It wasn't until a few years after the war, when the Lingshu Institute renovated the steam engines and reduced fuel consumption, that civilian routes were developed.

What the history books don't mention was that the first use to which Great Liang's new railway system was put was to spirit away a marshal from the front lines.

Alas, the history books so often miss the point.

Later, although Chang Geng fully escaped the influence of the wu'ergu, he always kept a few packets of pacifying fragrance on him. Officials and civilians alike imitated the emperor in his health-conscious ways. Caring for one's health became the fashion of the era, and in their free time, the citizens would gather to discuss how to replenish qi and blood and soothe the mind. Meals containing medicinal ingredients became a distinct cuisine, which enjoyed a raging popularity in the capital for a time.

On one occasion, when Miss Chen visited Chang Geng in the capital with General Shen, she smelled the faint herbal scent that still lingered on the emperor's person. After so many years, she had completely forgotten their offhand conversation on the steam train. She tactfully expressed that His Majesty's wu'ergu had indeed been fully cured, and he needn't continue to be so careful—did he doubt her abilities?

Chang Geng smiled and said nothing.

Upon reaching middle age, Gu Yun no longer went on long tours with the border garrisons. Aside from routine military inspections, he spent the great majority of his time in the capital city. After all, life in the capital was more comfortable, and he had someone to take care of him in his own estate. As time went on, he was so doted on at home that he developed a certain fussiness—sometimes, when he went on long trips to new locations, he found himself struggling to sleep for a night or two.

The strange thing was, so long as he placed a packet of pacifying fragrance beside his pillow, he had no difficulty sleeping at all.

Extra:
A Few Miscellaneous Anecdotes

ONE: REGARDING GREENHEAVEN

IF ANYONE WERE TO GUESS, they'd most certainly assume that Marshal Gu, who got his start as a soldier and spent years eating sand and sipping the northern wind, was the lackadaisical sort with no mind for fine details. The emperor, on the contrary, had been even-tempered and cultured since his youth. His every action bespoke an elegance sufficient to hide the foreign blood that ran in his veins. Perhaps it was natural to conclude that in private, the emperor would be the one planning every little thing, while Gu Yun answered "whatever you want" to every inquiry.

However, it was in fact Chang Geng, the village-boy-turned- emperor, who wasn't nearly so bothered about the finer things in life as his elegant exterior suggested. Aside from burying himself in work, training his body, and caring for his health, he had few other hobbies. Whenever Gu Yun was away, he lived like a monk. He rose early and retired early, starting every morning sparring with the iron puppets (the guards would never dare chase the emperor around with their swords) before going off to attend court or handle other business. At mealtimes, he ate whatever the kitchens set before him. He was never picky if the food was bad, nor greedy if it was good. He ate until he was nearly—but not quite—full, and had no vile habit of indulging in drink after every meal. Because he'd slept poorly throughout his youth, he seldom drank tea, much less wine. He subsisted on plain boiled water…until Gu Yun returned, and along with him a life of sound and color.

Gu Yun was his perfect opposite. He couldn't stand to be bored, and as soon as he was, one could expect a great fuss to be made. After many years of observation, Chang Geng concluded that this wasn't because Gu Yun was truly so finicky, but simply because he enjoyed keeping himself busy.

After selecting the villa that would become Greenhaven, the obvious next step was renovations. Chang Geng had intended to handle the renovations himself. He figured it was difficult, boring work—even if it was their own home, the thought and effort it would take to manage renovations for an estate of this size was immense. He didn't want Gu Yun to lose sleep over it, and so reluctantly took the burden on himself.

By the time he managed to nail down the plans, Chang Geng's head had swelled two sizes with the burgeoning headache.

When Gu Yun next returned to the capital from his inspections in the north, the Ministry of Works foremen in charge of the project met with him on the emperor's orders to ask if he had a drop or two of input.

As it happened, the marshal's input was as dense as pouring rain.

What Chang Geng saw as difficult, boring work was Gu Yun's greatest source of entertainment over that period. During his time in the capital, Gu Yun turned up at the Ministry of Works every day to chatter with the two foremen in charge of the project, adding this and changing that. When he went home each day, he'd bring handfuls of random trinkets, which he offered to Chang Geng like precious

treasures. He showed him the most popular kind of decorative brick in Jiangnan one day, or five different designs for a pavilion foyer the next, asking him every time to pick his favorite. Chang Geng bent over and examined those five different plans with a magnifying glass three times over, yet failed to spot the differences between them.

Well, that was all right. Chang Geng didn't quite understand his enthusiasm, but as long as it made Gu Yun happy, he didn't mind.

In the end, Gu Yun made almost all the decisions on the latter half of the renovations on Greenhaven. He had an endless patience for this kind of diversion; even the variety of bamboo to be planted beside the pavilions was something he wanted to pick himself. Unable to decide, he bought a few specimens to grow in the Marquis Estate in the capital, claiming he wanted to see the effect firsthand.

Chang Geng helped him plant the bamboo, thinking to himself that, standing in a row, all the little sprouts looked like they'd been born to the same mother. Perplexed, he wondered, *Maybe the differences will appear once they've grown a bit?*

Before Chang Geng could see any differences, a few of the plants threw in the towel, unable to adjust to the cool climate of the capital. The question was consigned to eternal mystery.

One day, long after Greenhaven was completed, Gu Yun pastured his horses in the rear mountains as Chang Geng rolled up his pant legs to fish in the river.

The moment Chang Geng felt a tug on the line, Gu Yun's foolish horses would canter over and frisk about, as if they'd come just to make trouble. Chang Geng sat for hours without catching a single fish. He was in no hurry; he sedately pulled in his line and put a new piece of bait on the hook. Sitting there with his eyes half-lidded, who knew if he was fishing or meditating.

Gu Yun had a sudden thought. "Say—didn't you say you'd build this estate? How did it end up becoming my job?"

"My original ideas were simple," Chang Geng said lazily, "just the buildings in the rear courtyard."

Out of the entirety of Greenhaven, the rooms in which the two of them lived were the only part where Gu Yun hadn't made major revisions. When he'd joined the planning, Chang Geng had made detailed arrangements for them already—a slightly sunken courtyard with winding brooks, duckweed, and stone steps, all illustrated in His Majesty's own hand.

Gu Yun lay down beside the lake, pillowing his head on his hands. "The foremen said you gave them free rein everywhere else. I think the truth is you only had the patience to renovate one courtyard."

Chang Geng smiled. "It's not that I had the patience for only one courtyard. It's because my heart contains only one courtyard."

Gu Yun blinked.

Great Master Liao Ran had once said, *If your heart contains only a corner, worries the size of a house must be squeezed into a corner. If your heart is as large as the world, worries the size of a mountain will be no more than a drop in the ocean.*

Although the great master was not fond of hygiene, he was one of the most eminent monks of his generation. In Chang Geng's youth, he had heeded this advice and banished his worries and resentments to the furthest reaches of the land. But now all his troubles had resolved themselves, and so—much like in the Buddhist parable of Mt. Meru—he stored his world and its four corners back into a speck the size of a mustard seed, stuffing it all inside one little courtyard.

Squished up like that, would his affections not also be condensed beyond measure?

A school of fish was about to make another half-hearted approach when the sound of hoofbeats came up again behind him. Chang Geng sighed. "Marshal, if those retired soldiers of yours don't control themselves, we'll have no grilled fish for dinner tonight. You might as well boil your hand because that's all you'll be eating."

Gu Yun peeled off his outer robe. "Wait for it."

Chang Geng thought the marshal was going to go discipline his wayward horses. Instead, he nearly got a face full of water as Gu Yun jumped into the river.

"Catch!" he said.

One hand sliced into the water, not raising a single splash, and he scooped up a plump fish and tossed it into the air. It sparkled in the sunlight, glittering as it crashed right into Chang Geng's arms. The droplets of water arcing behind its tail traced a shimmering rainbow in the air.

The former emperor fumbled to catch it, dropping his fishing pole into the river. "Gu Zixi! How old are you?!"

Gu Yun laughed uproariously.

But his delight soon turned to sorrow. That evening, he didn't taste the grilled fish of his dreams—afraid he'd catch cold after his dip in the river, Chang Geng marched him off to a hot bath, poured warming tea down his throat, and overrode all his objections, turning the promise of grilled fish into a tragically bland fish soup.

He even added chopped ginger…this damned madman of an emperor!

TWO: REGARDING WHY CHANG GENG CONTINUED TO BE CHASED AROUND BY IRON PUPPETS AFTER BECOMING EMPEROR

UNLIKE GU YUN, who had been raised on the battlefield, Chang Geng never had many opportunities to wield a weapon in battle.

After his ascension, countries from all seven seas bowed to Great Liang's might, and the nation was at peace. Soldiers were sent to work the fields in the border towns, and the Northwest Garrison organized a melon-growing competition to see which general's foot soldiers could grow the biggest, sweetest melons. He Ronghui won first place and earned himself the moniker of "Great General of the Godly Melons." He was inordinately pleased with himself and foisted a cartful of his wares on Gu Yun every time he returned to the capital to report on his duties, whether the marshal wanted them or not.

In this peaceful clime, the emperor obviously would never personally don his armor and take to the battlefield. But still he rose before dawn each day to give the Marquis Estate's iron puppets their round of barehanded beatings. He could work up a sweat even on the coldest days of winter, and paused for neither wind nor rain. Even many years later, when his hair was streaked with white, he could still operate a suit of hawk armor and draw the heaviest of iron bows.

Later generations surmised he retained these habits due to his experiences early in life.

Chang Geng—Li Min, posthumously known as Emperor Wen of Liang—had grown up in dirt-poor Yanhui Town. Even if Gu Yun had taken him back to the capital in his teens, he had lived there for only a little over a year, not enough time to grow accustomed to the capital's luxuries, before he went off to roam the world with Great Master Liao Ran.

From his earliest years, he relied on his wits to minimize his suffering at Xiu-niang's hands.

As a child, he held tight to his knife and fended off a wolf pack's attack until help arrived.

As a youth, he left home and encountered countless local ruffians, mountain bandits, and jianghu wanderers with every sort of strange or wicked temperament. There were many instances when a fight might have broken out with the slightest slip of the tongue, and his companions couldn't be relied upon for protection. Whether he chose to fight or run, he depended wholly on himself.

And when he finally reached adulthood and returned to the capital to accept his princely title, the Far Westerners nearly ground the city to dust.

The first half of his life was spent in the swirling turmoil of war, unrest, and revolution. He never learned to be an aloof noble who left the matter of his personal safety to his personal and imperial guards. He was like a lone wolf, diligently sharpening his claws and teeth even while living a life of comfort. He'd always felt that one chip more in his hands was better than one chip less, and he reminded himself that power was as fleeting as the clouds scudding across the sky. One ought never grow infatuated with or reliant upon it.

In the end, it was only through expending every last gram of his strength and with the help of a great dash of luck that he had managed to walk the tightrope over that most treacherous ravine and protect all he had wanted to. After all he'd been through, how could this man ever lower his guard?

Stars of Chaos
FIN

Author Afterword

THIS STORY is a fairytale written for kidults.

It often seems that, in life, loneliness is more inevitable than death. To young readers, perhaps death is far off, something to be considered only in the distant future. If one can find meaning in life and death during one's time on this earth, then perhaps the prospect of leaving it might even become, to some, something romantic.

The same cannot be said of loneliness. Loneliness grows in the cracks in our bones and lingers in the spaces between our breaths. The extroverted reach out to their peers in every way they can, hoping to establish a flash of connection and forget their solitude. Meanwhile, the introverted turn to their own souls for comfort in a futile attempt to bury their loneliness beneath a veneer of calm.

During *Stars of Chaos: Sha Po Lang*'s initial serialization on JJWXC, many readers, yet to finish the novel, left their pessimistic predictions under each chapter. Some believed the protagonists' intense feelings for each other would be tainted by power, while others presumed the chaos of war would force them to part forever, in life and death. Everyone knows the world is as changeable as the tide, human emotions are as thin as paper, and regardless of whether one is a saint, sage, deity, or demon, everyone is bound by their own circumstances.

But I did not allow this story to develop that way. Instead, I did my best to turn this novel into a dreamy reverie—a puff of cotton candy that might be sold by Disney. To that end, I constructed an intricate plot with many details to give the semblance of realism. This way, in the handful of hours during which readers immersed themselves in this story, they could forget the trials and tribulations of life and find some small measure of solace.

This is the kind of author I am. I do not wish to touch the truths of the world, nor do I wish to interrogate anyone's soul. I only wish to comfort you, my readers.

Good night.

priest

Written on the night of January 14, 2024, in Beijing, China

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CHARACTERS

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference, and not a definitive translation.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Chang Geng

MILK NAME: Chang Geng (□□ / "Evening star" or "Evening Venus")

GIVEN NAME: Li Min (□□ / Surname Li, "Autumn sky")

TITLE: Prince Yan (□ / "Goose")

Chang Geng spent nearly fourteen years living an uneventful life on the northern border, only for his world to be turned upside down when he learned he was actually the long-lost fourth prince of Great Liang.

Gu Yun

MILK NAME: Shiliu (□□ / "Sixteen")

GIVEN NAME: Gu Yun (□□ / Surname Gu, "Sunlight")

COURTESY NAME: Gu Zixi (□□□ / Surname Gu; "Daybreak," literary)

TITLE: Marquis of Anding (□□ / "Order")

RANK: Marshal

The fearsome leader of the Black Iron Battalion and Chang Geng's beloved young godfather.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Shen Yi

GIVEN NAME: Shen Yi (□□ / Surname Shen, "Change" or "Easy")

COURTESY NAME: Shen Jiping (□□□ / Surname Shen, "Season," "Even" or "Peaceful")

RANK: Commander in Chief of the Southwest Army

Gu Yun's loyal friend and right-hand man.

Ge Pangxiao

MILK NAME: Ge Pangxiao (□□□ / Surname Ge, "Chubby youngster")

GIVEN NAME: Ge Chen (□□ / Surname Ge, “Dawn”)

Chang Geng’s childhood tagalong who leaves Yanhui Town with Chang Geng after becoming orphaned. Ge Pangxiao has a fondness for machines.

Cao Niangzi

MILK NAME: Cao Niangzi (□□□ / Surname Cao, “Lady”)

GIVEN NAME: Cao Chunhua (□□□ / Surname Cao, “Spring flower”)

Chang Geng’s childhood admirer, who leaves Yanhui Town with Chang Geng. Cao Niangzi has a fondness for dressing up as both women and men, and is an expert at taking on different roles.

Chen Qingxu

GIVEN NAME: Chen Qingxu (□□□ / Surname Chen, “Gentle,” “Silk floss”)

A jianghu physician with a cool demeanor whose family specializes in medicine. A member of the Linyuan Pavilion.

Liao Ran

DHARMA NAME: Liao Ran (□□ / “To understand,” “To be so”)

TITLE: Great Master

A multi-talented monk from the National Temple and member of the Linyuan Pavilion.

THE EIGHTEEN TRIBES

Chikuyou

NAME: Chikuyou (□□□)

Wolf King Jialai Yinghuo’s trusted aide and captain of his personal guard.

Xiu-niang

ALIAS: Xiu-niang (□□ / “Refined lady”)

GIVEN NAME: Huge’er (□□□ / “The violet gold at the center of the earth”)

Chang Geng’s “mother,” who turns out to be his aunt. She is a member of the Celestial Wolf Tribe and their agent inside Great Liang.

Jialai Yinghuo

GIVEN NAME: Jialai (□□)

NAME TRANSLATED INTO CHINESE: Yinghuo (□□ / “Glimmering deceiver” or “Mars”)

TITLE: Wolf King of the Celestial Wolf Tribe

The crown prince and later king of the Celestial Wolf Tribe. He orchestrates the infiltration and attack on Great Liang at the beginning of the story.

THE CAPITAL

Du Wanquan

NAME: Du Wanquan (□□□ / Surname Du, "Perfectly safe")

A wealthy and powerful merchant known as the "God of Wealth," and a member of the Linyuan Pavilion.

Emperor Wu

The reigning Emperor of Great Liang prior to the Yuanhe Emperor at the start of the story. Gu Yun's maternal grandfather.

Fang Qin

NAME: Fang Qin (□□ / Surname Fang, "To revere")

TITLE: Minister of Revenue

The leader of a faction of rich and powerful noble families within the imperial court.

Li Feng

GIVEN NAME: Li Feng (□□ / Surname Li, "Plentiful")

ERA NAME: Longan (□□ / "Grand Peace")

Chang Geng's elder half-brother, the crown prince, who ascends the throne after the death of his father, the Yuanhe Emperor.

Liao Chi

DHARMA NAME: Liao Chi (□□, "To understand," "Infatuation")

TITLE: Abbot of the Temple of National Protection

Abbot of the National Temple and Liao Ran's shixiong.

Jiang Chong

GIVEN NAME: Jiang Chong (□□ / Surname Jiang, "Abundance")

COURTESY NAME: Jiang Hanshi (□□□ / Surname Jiang, "Cold stone")

TITLE: Chief Justice of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review

Shen Yi's senior via the imperial examination system, a friend and ally of Gu Yun, and member of Chang Geng's Grand Council.

Lü Chang

GIVEN NAME: Lü Chang (□□ / Surname Lü, "Constant/Unchanging")

COURTESY NAME: Lü Yannian (□□□ / Surname Lü, "To prolong life")

TITLE: Assistant Minister of Revenue

The head of the well-connected Lü family, and a key player in Fang Qin's faction of nobles.

The Noble Consort

TITLE: Noble Consort

TITLE: Goddess of the Celestial Wolf Tribe

Chang Geng's birth mother. As the goddess of the Celestial Wolf Tribe, she was gifted to Great Liang after their surrender, and became the sole noble consort within the imperial harem.

Prince Wei

TITLE: Prince Wei (□ / "Kingdom of Wei")

Chang Geng's elder half-brother, the Second Prince. Son of the Yuanhe Emperor. Colluded with Dongying nationals in an unsuccessful plan to overthrow the Longan Emperor by striking the capital from the East Sea.

The Yuanhe Emperor

ERA NAME: Yuanhe (□□ / "Primal," "Harmony")

The reigning emperor of Great Liang at the start of the story. Chang Geng's birth father.

Wang Guo

NAME: Wang Guo (□□ / Surname Wang, "To enfold")

The Longan Emperor's maternal uncle and the most favored official in the imperial court.

Xu Ling

NAME: Xu Ling (□□ / Surname Xu, "To command")

COURTESY NAME: Mingyu (□□, "Bright," "Virtue")

TITLE: Right Assistant Supervisory Commissioner of the Department of Supervision

An earnest court official sent to assist Chang Geng on his mission to Jiangbei.

Zhang Fenghan

COURTESY NAME: Zhang Fenghan (□□□ / Surname Zhang, “To present a letter”)

The director of the Lingshu Institute known for his stubbornness. A member of the Linyuan Pavilion.

OTHER

He Ronghui

NAME: He Ronghui (□□□ / Surname He, “Glory,” “Splendor”)

RANK: Commander

The commander of the Black Hawk Division of the Black Iron Battalion.

Cai Bin

NAME: Cai Bin (□□ / Surname Cai, “A type of jade”)

RANK: General

Originally the commander of the Central Plains Garrison. Interim commander of the northern front.

Lord Jakobson

ALIAS: Mister Ja

A mysterious operative from the Far West. He is the right hand of the Western pope, who, in the world of Stars of Chaos, is a military leader as well as a religious one.

Yang Ronggui

NAME: Yang Ronggui (□□□ / Surname Yang, “Glory,” “Osmanthus”)

TITLE: Governor of Liangjiang

Governor overseeing the region of Jiangbei, which lies on the front line of the territory occupied by the Far Westerners, and a member of the well-connected Lü family by marriage.

Yao Zhen

GIVEN NAME: Yao Zhen (□□ / Surname Yao, “Town”)

COURTESY NAME: Yao Chongze (□□□ / Surname Yao, “Great favor”)

TITLE: Regional Judiciary Commissioner of Yingtian

Gu Yun’s longtime acquaintance and a local official in Jiangnan.

Zhong Chan

GIVEN NAME: Zhong Chan (□□ / Surname Zhong, “Cicada”)

RANK: General

A general who was dismissed from his post after defying the emperor, and both Gu Yun and Chang Geng’s shifu in martial arts.

INSTITUTIONS

The Government of Great Liang

The emperor is the highest authority in Great Liang, an autocratic monarchy. The top-level administrative bodies of the state include a number of departments and ministries, such as the Ministry of Revenue and Ministry of War.

Years ago, the militant Emperor Wu expanded the borders of Great Liang and built the nation to the height of its power. Due to his lack of male heirs, the more compassionate Yuanhe Emperor was selected as his successor from a different branch of the imperial royal family. The Longan Emperor, the son of Yuanhe Emperor, takes after his father in temperament.

The Military of Great Liang and the Black Iron Battalion

The armed forces of Great Liang consist of eight major military branches—the Kite, Carapace, Steed, Pelt, Hawk, Chariot, Cannon, and Dragon Divisions—each of which specializes in a particular type of warfare. Troops are divided between five major garrisons located in five different regions throughout the country.

Chief among these is the Black Iron Battalion, which is presently stationed in the Western Regions. An elite group of soldiers widely considered to be one of the most powerful military forces in the known world, the Black Iron Battalion is currently under the command of Marshal Gu Yun and comprises the Black Hawk, Black Carapace, and Black Steed Divisions.

The Temple of National Protection

The Temple of National Protection, also known as the National Temple, practices Buddhism, the religion of Great Liang’s imperial family.

The Lingshu Institute (□□ / “Spiritual pivot”)

An academy directly under the emperor’s authority that develops the equipment of Great Liang’s military, as well as other mechanical inventions.

The Linyuan Pavilion (□□ / “Approaching the abyss”)

A mysterious organization of people from all levels of society that emerges to aid parties they find worthy in times of chaos. The decision to intervene in worldly affairs is determined by the formation and bestowment of the Linyuan tablet. In addition to granting its bearer access to the full extent of the Linyuan Pavilion’s

resources, the tablet also allows for the mobilization of the extrajudicial body responsible for meting out punishments to organization members known as the Daofa Court.

CHARACTERS

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference, and not a definitive translation.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Chang Geng

MILK NAME: Chang Geng (□□ / "Evening star" or "Evening Venus")

GIVEN NAME: Li Min (□□ / Surname Li, "Autumn sky")

TITLE: Prince Yan (□ / "Goose")

Chang Geng spent nearly fourteen years living an uneventful life on the northern border, only for his world to be turned upside down when he learned he was actually the long-lost fourth prince of Great Liang.

Gu Yun

MILK NAME: Shiliu (□□ / "Sixteen")

GIVEN NAME: Gu Yun (□□ / Surname Gu, "Sunlight")

COURTESY NAME: Gu Zixi (□□□ / Surname Gu; "Daybreak," literary)

TITLE: Marquis of Anding (□□ / "Order")

RANK: Marshal

The fearsome leader of the Black Iron Battalion and Chang Geng's beloved young godfather.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Shen Yi

GIVEN NAME: Shen Yi (□□ / Surname Shen, "Change" or "Easy")

COURTESY NAME: Shen Jiping (□□□ / Surname Shen, "Season," "Even" or "Peaceful")

RANK: Commander in Chief of the Southwest Army

Gu Yun's loyal friend and right-hand man.

Ge Pangxiao

MILK NAME: Ge Pangxiao (□□□ / Surname Ge, "Chubby youngster")

GIVEN NAME: Ge Chen (□□ / Surname Ge, "Dawn")

Chang Geng's childhood tagalong who leaves Yanhui Town with Chang Geng after becoming orphaned. Ge Pangxiao has a fondness for machines.

Cao Niangzi

MILK NAME: Cao Niangzi (□□□ / Surname Cao, "Lady")

GIVEN NAME: Cao Chunhua (□□□ / Surname Cao, "Spring flower")

Chang Geng's childhood admirer, who leaves Yanhui Town with Chang Geng. Cao Niangzi has a fondness for dressing up as both women and men, and is an expert at taking on different roles.

Chen Qingxu

GIVEN NAME: Chen Qingxu (□□□ / Surname Chen, "Gentle," "Silk floss")

A jianghu physician with a cool demeanor whose family specializes in medicine. A member of the Linyuan Pavilion.

Liao Ran

DHARMA NAME: Liao Ran (□□ / "To understand," "To be so")

TITLE: Great Master

A multi-talented monk from the National Temple and member of the Linyuan Pavilion.

THE EIGHTEEN TRIBES

Xiu-niang

ALIAS: Xiu-niang (□□ / "Refined lady")

GIVEN NAME: Huge'er (□□□ / "The violet gold at the center of the earth")

Chang Geng's "mother," who turns out to be his aunt. She is a member of the Celestial Wolf Tribe and their agent inside Great Liang.

Jialai Yinghuo

GIVEN NAME: Jialai (□□)

NAME TRANSLATED INTO CHINESE: Yinghuo (□□ / "Glimmering deceiver" or "Mars")

TITLE: Wolf King of the Celestial Wolf Tribe

The crown prince and later king of the Celestial Wolf Tribe. He orchestrates the infiltration and attack on Great Liang at the beginning of the story.

THE CAPITAL

Du Wanquan

NAME: Du Wanquan (□□□ / Surname Du, "Perfectly safe")

A wealthy and powerful merchant known as the "God of Wealth," and a member of the Linyuan Pavilion.

Emperor Wu

The reigning Emperor of Great Liang prior to the Yuanhe Emperor at the start of the story. Gu Yun's maternal grandfather.

Fang Qin

NAME: Fang Qin (□□ / Surname Fang, "To revere")

TITLE: Minister of Revenue

The leader of a faction of rich and powerful noble families within the imperial court.

Li Feng

GIVEN NAME: Li Feng (□□ / Surname Li, "Plentiful")

ERA NAME: Longan (□□ / "Grand Peace")

Chang Geng's elder half-brother, the crown prince, who ascends the throne after the death of his father, the Yuanhe Emperor.

Liao Chi

DHARMA NAME: Liao Chi (□□, "To understand," "Infatuation")

TITLE: Abbot of the Temple of National Protection

Abbot of the National Temple and Liao Ran's shixiong.

Jiang Chong

GIVEN NAME: Jiang Chong (□□ / Surname Jiang, "Abundance")

COURTESY NAME: Jiang Hanshi (□□□ / Surname Jiang, "Cold stone")

TITLE: Chief Justice of the Imperial Court of Judicial Review

Shen Yi's senior via the imperial examination system, a friend and ally of Gu Yun, and member of Chang Geng's Grand Council.

Lü Chang

GIVEN NAME: Lü Chang (□□ / Surname Lü, “Constant/Unchanging”)

COURTESY NAME: Lü Yannian (□□□ / Surname Lü, “To prolong life”)

TITLE: Assistant Minister of Revenue

The head of the well-connected Lü family, and a key player in Fang Qin’s faction of nobles.

The Noble Consort

TITLE: Noble Consort

TITLE: Goddess of the Celestial Wolf Tribe

Chang Geng’s birth mother. As the goddess of the Celestial Wolf Tribe, she was gifted to Great Liang after their surrender, and became the sole noble consort within the imperial harem.

Prince Wei

TITLE: Prince Wei (□ / “Kingdom of Wei”)

Chang Geng’s elder half-brother, the Second Prince. Son of the Yuanhe Emperor. Colluded with Dongying nationals in an unsuccessful plan to overthrow the Longan Emperor by striking the capital from the East Sea.

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OTHER

Fu Zhicheng

GIVEN NAME: Fu Zhicheng (□□□ / Surname Fu, “Ambition,” “Honesty”)

RANK: Commander in Chief (of the Southern Border Army)

TITLE: Governor of the Southwest

A military commander in the south who got his start as a bandit. Gu Yun’s father, the former Marquis of Anding, supported his military career after defeating him in battle.

Lord Jakobson

ALIAS: Mister Ja

A mysterious operative from the Far West. He is the right hand of the Western pope, who, in the world of Stars of Chaos, is a military leader as well as a religious one.

Tan Hongfei

GIVEN NAME: Tan Hongfei (□□□ / Surname Tan, “Swan goose,” “To fly”)

RANK: Commander (of the Northern Camp)

A former member of the Black Iron Battalion who was forced to leave his position after the attack that injured young Gu Yun.

Yang Ronggui

NAME: Yang Ronggui (□□□ / Surname Yang, “Glory,” “Osmanthus”)

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LOCATIONS

GREAT LIANG

The Capital

The capital city of Great Liang.

Dagu Harbor

A naval base in the Beihai region, several days' ride south of Great Liang's capital.

Jiayu Pass

A fortress in the northwest and an important waypoint of the Silk Road.

Liangjiang

A fertile region in Great Liang's southeast that encompasses Jiangbei and Jiangnan.

The Southern Border

The mountainous southernmost region of Great Liang, where bandits run rampant.

Yangzhou City

A city in Jiangbei, north of the Yangtze River.

Yanhui Town (□□ / "Wild goose's return")

A town on the Northern Border of Great Liang, where Chang Geng grew up.

Yingtian Prefecture

A prefecture in Jiangnan Province, south of the Yangtze River, near the East Sea.

FOREIGN POWERS

The Eighteen Tianlang (Celestial Wolf) Tribes

A people residing in the grasslands north of Great Liang, where violet gold is plentiful. They pay an annual tribute to Great Liang after being defeated in battle by the Black Iron Battalion.

Grand Capital

The principal settlement of the Eighteen Tianlang Tribes, where Wolf King Jialai Yinghuo resides.

Loulan

A small but prosperous nation in the Western Regions located at the entrance of the Silk Road. They have a friendly relationship with Great Liang.

Qiuci

A tiny nation in the Western Regions that acquired a suspicious number of sand tiger war chariots.

Qiemo

A tiny nation in the Western Regions that came into conflict with Qiuci.

Dongying

An island nation to the east of Great Liang.

The Far West

A region far to the west beyond the Silk Road that excels in seafaring trade and creating violet-gold-powered devices.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Courtesy Names versus Given Names

A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China, but is commonly seen in historically-inspired media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

Milk Names

In China, babies are traditionally given their □□ (literally "big name," or less literally, "given name") one hundred days after their birth. During those first hundred days, parents would refer to the child by their □□ (lit. "little name") or □□ (lit. "milk name"). Milk names might be childish, employing a diminutive like xiao- or doubling a syllable, but they might also be selected to ward off harm to the child, for example Cao Niangzi's milk name meaning "lady." Many parents might continue referring to their children by their milk name long after they have received their given name.

At the beginning of *Stars of Chaos*, Chang Geng is already thirteen or fourteen years old, but has not been given a "big name." Since Yanhui Town is a backwater border town, this is not terribly strange—historically, many rural families have tended to give their children given names much later in life than the hundredth day. This may be because life in the countryside was harsher and it was more difficult to raise children to adulthood.

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

XIAO-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

-LAO: A suffix attached to the surname of venerated elders. Denotes a particularly high degree of respect.

Family

DAGE: A word meaning “eldest brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer that one respects. When added as a suffix, it becomes an affectionate address for any older male. Can also be used by itself to refer to one’s true oldest brother.

DAJIE: A word meaning “eldest sister.” It can be used as a casual term of address for an older female.

ERGE: A word meaning “second brother.”

JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can be attached as a suffix or used independently to address an unrelated female peer.

NIANG: A word meaning “mother” or “lady.”

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

YIFU: A word meaning “godfather” or “adoptive father.” (*See Godparentage Relationships for more information)*

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIDI: Junior male member of one’s own school or fellow disciple/apprentice under the same master.

SHIFU: Teacher or master. For one’s master in one’s own school. Gender-neutral.

SHISHU: The junior fellow disciple of one’s master. Gender-neutral.

SHIXIONG: Senior male member of one’s own school or fellow disciple/apprentice under the same master.

XIANSHENG: A respectful suffix with several uses, including for someone with a great deal of expertise in their profession or a teacher. Can be used independently.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Stars of Chaos.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

Shā pò láng

Shā as in **sho**p

Pò as in **pu**t

Láng as in **long**

Cháng Gēng

Ch as in **ch**ange, áng as in l**ong**

G as in **g**oose, ēng as in s**ung**

Gù Yún

Gù as in **goo**se

Y as in **y**ou, ún as in b**in**, but with lips rounded as for b**oon**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**allant

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: **y** as in **y**ou plus **ow** as in sh**ow**

IE: **ye** as in **yes**

UO: **wa** as in **wa**rm

GLO

GLOSSARY

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

TERMINOLOGY

BALD DONKEY: A derogatory epithet used to describe Buddhist monks. It stems from the stereotypical image of a bald monk riding a donkey while begging for alms.

BOWING AND CURTSYING: As is seen in other Asian cultures, standing bows are a traditional greeting and are also used when giving an apology. A deeper bow shows greater respect.

BUDDHISM: The central belief of Buddhism is that life is a cycle of suffering and rebirth, only to be escaped by reaching enlightenment (nirvana). Buddhists believe in karma, that a person's actions will influence their fortune in this life and future lives. The teachings of the Buddha are known as The Middle Way and emphasize a practice that is neither extreme asceticism nor extreme indulgence.

CALLIGRAPHY: Chinese calligraphy is a form of visual art and a central part of Chinese culture. It is considered one of the traditional "four arts" of gentlemen scholars, along with guqin, weiqi, and painting. Calligraphy by notable masters is highly sought-after by collectors. A gift of calligraphy is a great honor for both the giver and the recipient.

CONCUBINES AND THE IMPERIAL HAREM: In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to possess women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status, hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

The imperial harem had its own ranking system. The exact details vary over the course of history, but can generally be divided into three overarching ranks: the empress, consorts, and concubines. The status of a prince or princess's mother is an important factor in their status in the imperial family, in addition to birth order and their own personal merits. Given the patrilineal rules of succession, the birth of a son can also elevate the mother's status, leading to fierce, oftentimes deadly, competition amongst ambitious members of the imperial harem.

CONFUCIANISM: Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius. Its influence on all aspects of Chinese culture is incalculable. Confucius

placed heavy importance on respect for one's elders and family, a concept broadly known as filial piety (□). The family structure is used in other contexts to urge similar behaviors, such as respect of a student toward a teacher, or people of a country toward their ruler.

COUGHING OR SPITTING BLOOD: A way to show a character is ill, injured, or upset. Despite the very physical nature of the response, it does not necessarily mean that a character has been wounded; their body could simply be reacting to a very strong emotion.

CROWS: An inauspicious symbol in Chinese culture. A person "has the beak of a crow" if they are prone to saying inauspicious things.

CULTIVATION: A practice in Daoism-inspired Chinese myth through which humans can achieve immortality and non-human creatures can acquire higher forms, more humanoid forms, or both.

DHARMA NAME: A name given to new disciples of Buddhism during their initiation ritual.

DAOISM: Daoism is the philosophy of the dao (□ / "the way"). Following the dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a "true human," safe from external harm and able to affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist beliefs.

DRAGONS: There are several kinds of dragons in Chinese mythology. Jiao (□) or jiaolong (□□), "flood dragons," are hornless, aquatic dragons that can summon storms and floods. Zhenlong (□□), "true dragons," also have water-related powers, but are capable of flying through the clouds. "True" dragons are a symbol of the divine and the emperor, hence the translation as "imperial dragons" in this story. According to myth, flood dragons can transform into true, or imperial, dragons by cultivating and passing heavenly tribulations.

ERA NAME: A designation for the years when a given emperor was on the throne (or some part of those years). This title is determined by the emperor when they ascend the throne, and can be used to refer to both the era and the emperor himself.

EYES: Descriptions like "phoenix eyes," "peach-blossom eyes," or "triangular eyes" refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, while peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid with gentle upward tilt at the outer corners and are often considered particularly alluring. Triangular eyes have eyelids which droop at the outer corner and are considered harsh and keen.

FACE: Mianzi (□□), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation, and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly or shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

FIRESTARTER: An ancient "lighter" made of easily flammable material inside a bamboo tube. It can be ignited by shaking or blowing on it.

FOOT BINDING: A process used to create artificially small feet, which were seen as an attractive trait for women during certain periods of Chinese history. The process involved breaking and tightly binding the foot to mold its shape. The foot might also be bound with pieces of broken crockery in order to induce necrosis in the broken toes and cause them to fall off, leading to a smaller final result.

GODPARENTAGE RELATIONSHIPS: Similar to the idea of "sworn brothers," gan (□) relationships are nominal familial relationships entered into by non-blood-related parties for a variety of reasons.

In the setting of *Stars of Chaos*, the border towns have a tradition where a debt of gratitude that a person could not repay by other means would be recognized by either the recipient or their descendants naming their benefactor as their godparent. Entering this relationship means that the recipient (or their descendant) now acknowledges filial duties toward their new godparent, such as making sure they are taken care of in their old age.

INCENSE TIME: A common way to tell time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Standardized incense sticks were manufactured and calibrated for specific time measurements: a half hour, an hour, a day, etc. These were available to people of all social classes. "One incense time" is roughly thirty minutes.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATION SYSTEM: The official system of examinations in ancient China that qualified someone for official service. It was a supposedly meritocratic system that allowed students from all backgrounds to rise up in society, but the extent to which this was true varied across time.

An examination mentor presides over the highest level of the imperial examination, with the emperor occasionally proctoring the test himself. The first-, second-, and third-ranked candidates are bestowed the titles Zhuangyuan, Bangyan, and Tanhua, respectively.

IRON CERTIFICATES WITH CINNABAR WRITING: An item given to important or accomplished officials by the emperor as an award and symbol of

alliance. The physical object is a piece of iron with a curved top, with carved words colored with cinnabar.

JIANGHU: The jianghu (□□ / "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes. For members of the jianghu, these moral codes supersede laws mandated by the government. Thus, the jianghu typically exists outside of or in opposition to mainstream society and its government, with its members customarily avoiding cooperation with government bureaucracy.

The jianghu is a staple of wuxia (□□ / "martial heroes"), one of the oldest Chinese literary genres, which consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice.

LOTUS FLOWER: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha. An extremely rare variety known as the bingdi lian (□□□) or "twin lotus" is considered an auspicious sign and a symbol of marital harmony.

MANDARIN DUCKS: Famous for mating for life, mandarin ducks are a symbol of marital harmony, and are frequently featured in Chinese art.

MOURNING PERIOD: The death of a parent was a major event in historical Chinese culture. Children who survived them would be expected to observe a mourning period during which they wore only plain white clothes, stayed at home, and ceased to partake in entertainment and social events. The exact length of the mourning period varied, and there could be exceptions if, for example, the child had important duties they had to attend to.

SHA PO LANG: Sha Po Lang (□□□) is the name of a key star formation in Zi Wei Dou Shu (□□□□ / "purple star astrology"), a common system of astrology in Chinese culture. It refers to an element of a natal star chart in which the stars Qi Sha (□□ / "seven killings"), Tan Lang (□□ / "greedy wolf"), and Po Jun (□□ / "vanquisher of armies") appear in four specific "palaces" of the sky.

Sha Po Lang in a natal horoscope foretells change and revolution, a turbulent fate. The fortunate among those with this in their star chart gain talent and fortune amidst chaos, while the less fortunate encounter disaster and destitution. Those with this formation in their natal horoscope will encounter great ups and downs, yet have the potential to make their name in dramatic fashion. Many great generals of ancient times were said to have been born under these stars.

SIX ARTS: The basis of education in ancient China, the six arts comprised the disciplines of rites, music, archery, chariotry, calligraphy, and mathematics.

THREE IMMORTAL SOULS AND SEVEN MORTAL FORMS: Hun (□) and po (□) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal souls or mortal forms which remain with the body of the deceased. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three hun and seven po is common in Daoism.

TIGER TALLY: A token used as proof of imperial authorization to deploy and command troops. In *Stars of Chaos*, there are three Black Iron Tiger Tallies total, which can command the eight branches of the Great Liang military in times of emergency. They are held by Gu Yun, the imperial court, and the emperor, respectively.

TITLES OF NOBILITY: Titles of nobility are an important feature of the traditional social structure of Imperial China. While the conferral and organization of specific titles evolved over time, in *Stars of Chaos*, such titles can be either inherited or bestowed by the emperor.

In the world of *Stars of Chaos*, a notable feature of the ranking system with respect to the imperial princes is that monosyllabic titles are reserved for princes of the first rank while disyllabic titles designate princes of the second rank.

Princes of the second rank are also known as commandery princes, so named for the administrative divisions they head. The title of commandery prince is not solely reserved for members of the imperial family, but can also be given to meritorious officials and rulers of vassal states.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing.

Another central concept in traditional Chinese medicine is that disease arises from an imbalance of elements in the body caused by disharmony in internal functions or environmental factors. For example, an excess of internal heat can cause symptoms such as fever, thirst, insomnia, and redness of the face. Excess internal heat can be treated with the consumption of foods with cooling properties.

QI DEVIATION: A physiological and psychological disorder believed to result from improper spiritual or martial training. Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death. Common treatments for qi deviation in fiction include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

UNBOUND HAIR: Neatly bound hair was historically an important aspect of one's attire. Loose, unbound hair was seen as highly improper, and is used as synecdoche to describe someone who is disheveled in appearance.

WEIQI: Also known by its Japanese name, Go, weiqi is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a nineteen-by-nineteen grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

WILD GEESE: A classic motif in Chinese poetry, the wild goose, or yan (□), has come to embody a host of different symbolic meanings. As a migratory bird, it can represent seasonal change as well as a loving message sent from afar. Famous for mating for life, a pair of geese can allude to marital bliss, while a lone goose can signify the loss of a loved one.

WUXING THEORY: Wuxing (□□ / "Five Phases") is a concept in Chinese philosophy used for describing interactions and relationships between phenomena. The expression □□ (literally "five motions") originally refers to the movements of the planets Mars (□□ / "fire star"), Mercury (□□ / "water star"), Jupiter (□□ / "wood star"), Venus (□□ / "metal star"), and Saturn (□□ / "earth star"), which correspond to the phases of fire, water, wood, metal, and earth, respectively. In wuxing cosmology, people are categorized according to the five phases and relationships are described in cycles.

Xiangke (□□ / lit. "mutually overcoming") refers to a cycle in which one phase acts as a restricting (and oftentimes destructive) agent on the other. The phase interactions in the ke (□) cycle are: wood breaks through earth, earth dams up water, water douses fire, fire melts metal, and metal chops through wood. When applied to people, these interactions take the form of karmic consequences, which are oftentimes directed at the children and other family members of the original actor. An example of one such cycle might be: An emperor killed many people to expand the nation → the adverse effects of his great deeds are directed toward his children in the form of early death.

Chinese superstition also holds that, due to their phase categorization, certain people's fate can "suppress" (□) the fates of the people around them. For example, if someone is categorized as metal, they may suppress people who have been categorized as wood. Similarly, if someone's fate is determined to be more tenacious than others, they may bring harm to their familial relations. In the case of Gu Yun's unmarriageable status, people have observed the misfortune that befell his family and concluded that he inherited a similar fate. Thus, any woman who marries him will suffer misfortune as her fate is suppressed by his.

YIN AND YANG ENERGY: The concept of yin and yang in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite or contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy can do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack.

THE WORLD OF STARS OF CHAOS

COPPER SQUALL: A horn-shaped device made of copper that amplifies the voice of the speaker when spoken into.

GIANT KITE AND RED-HEADED KITE: A large, amphibious airship, the giant kite is powered by steam and equipped with thousands of wing-like structures called fire pinions, which burn violet gold.

A variation of the giant kite is the red-headed kite. Unlike the giant kite, the red-headed kite is a small pleasure vessel that does not see use in the military.

GREAT CONDOR: An experimental ship which combines the propulsion system of hawk armor with the body of a small kite. This allows it to transport multiple passengers and fly far faster than clumsy giant kites. However, the prototype still suffers from fuel efficiency problems and lacks stability in inclement weather.

HEAVY ARMOR: A class of armor used in the military, heavy armor is powered by violet gold, allowing its wearers to traverse thousands of kilometers in seconds and lift objects weighing hundreds of kilograms. A single suit of heavy armor has the power to annihilate a thousand soldiers.

IRON CUFF: The part of light armor that encircles the wrist. Highly convenient, iron cuffs can be removed from full suits of armor and used on their own. A single iron cuff can conceal three or four silk darts.

LIGHT ARMOR: A class of armor used in the military, light armor is typically worn by the cavalry and can only support a small amount of propulsion. It relies primarily on man- and animal-power, and its primary advantages lie in how light and convenient it is.

LIGHT PELT: The lightest class of armor used in the military, the light pelt is specially designed for riding and weighs less than fifteen kilograms.

PARHELION BOW AND ARROW: A giant mechanical bow that runs on violet gold. When fully powered up, arrows released from such a bow can pierce through a city wall a dozen meters thick.

SILK DART: An extraordinarily thin knife that can be concealed in and fired from wrist cuffs.

VIOLET GOLD: A substance mined from beneath the earth which can be burned as fuel in high-quality mechanical devices. It is of such strategic importance that it is called the “lifeline” of Great Liang.

WINDSLASHER: A weapon used by the Black Iron Battalion. It looks like a staff when at rest, but spinning blades release from hidden incisions in one end when the weapon is spun.

WU’ERGU: A slow-acting poison of northern barbarian origin. It is purported to have the ability to transform someone into a great warrior, but those afflicted with wu’ergu are plagued with nightmares and eventually driven insane with bloodlust.

Footnotes

Chapter 117: Layer upon Layer

[1] Shang Yang, a Warring States-era statesman and reformer who was executed by the nobility, with whom his reforms were unpopular.

Chapter 119: Longing

[2] The fourth night watch period (of a total of five) is from 1:00 to 3:00 a.m.

Chapter 120: Hope

[3] Gao Changgong, a sixth century general from the Northern Qi dynasty noted for the fearsome mask he reportedly wore in battle because of his feminine beauty.

Chapter 125: Endgame (Part II)

[4] Zhang Zai, a Song dynasty philosopher and politician most known for his work on ethics and metaphysics.

Extra: Affections from the Deceased

[5] Based on the Chinese lunisolar calendar, the divination almanac provides day-to-day information on when it is auspicious or inauspicious to engage in different activities.

Extra: A Path Called Linyuan

[6] One of the six realms of rebirth and existence in Buddhism, the beast realm is believed to be a hellish realm where its inhabitants are driven by impulse and instinct to prey on each other and suffer.

Extra: Qingming After the Rain

[7] Also known as Tomb-Sweeping Day, a festival that takes place on the fifteenth day after the Spring Equinox. On this day, families visit the graves of their ancestors to clean the tombs and make offerings to the deceased.

[8] Also known as joss paper, spirit money is a type of burnt offering common in Chinese ancestor veneration. It is believed that an offering of spirit paper allows one’s ancestors to purchase things needed for a comfortable afterlife.

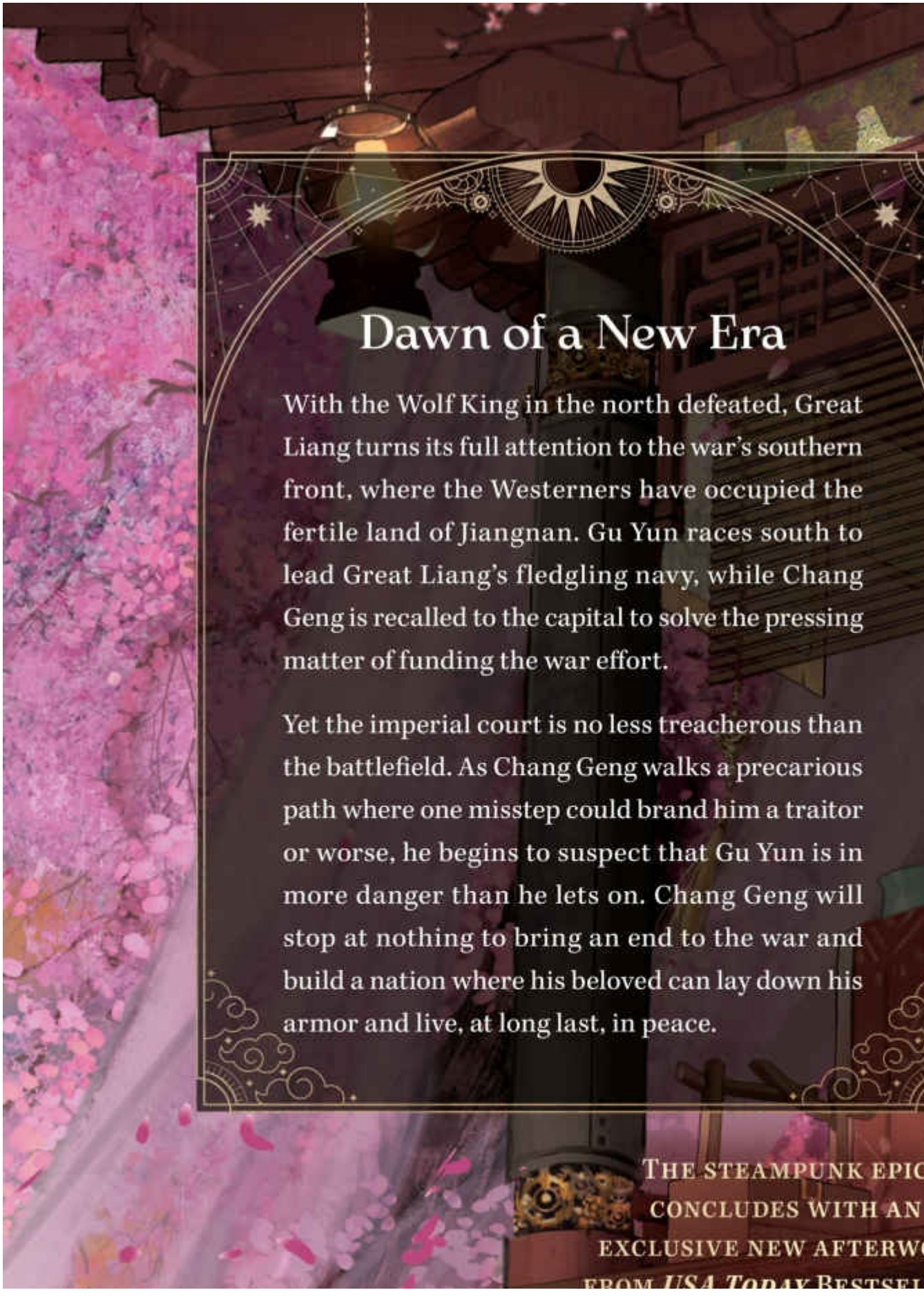
Extra: The World of Mortals

[9] A custom wherein friends and family of the bride and groom disturb the privacy of the bridal chamber by pranking them on their wedding night as a way to

dispel evil spirits.

About the Author

An internationally renowned author who writes for the novel serialization website, JJWXC, priest's books have inspired multimedia adaptations and been published in numerous languages around the world. priest is known for writing compelling drama that incorporates humor and creativity, and a grand sense of style that infuses her worldbuilding. Her works include *Stars of Chaos: Sha Po Lang*, *Guardian: Zhen Hun*, *Liu Yao: The Revitalization of Fuyao Sect, Mo Du (Silent Reading)*, and *Can Ci Pin (The Defective)*, among others.



Dawn of a New Era

With the Wolf King in the north defeated, Great Liang turns its full attention to the war's southern front, where the Westerners have occupied the fertile land of Jiangnan. Gu Yun races south to lead Great Liang's fledgling navy, while Chang Geng is recalled to the capital to solve the pressing matter of funding the war effort.

Yet the imperial court is no less treacherous than the battlefield. As Chang Geng walks a precarious path where one misstep could brand him a traitor or worse, he begins to suspect that Gu Yun is in more danger than he lets on. Chang Geng will stop at nothing to bring an end to the war and build a nation where his beloved can lay down his armor and live, at long last, in peace.

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